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 XBOX 360

Say it loud!

Every single one of us does it. A certain game is announced that you crave, it gets hyped, you get caught up in the madness of it all. We all like to get pumped up with the excitement of good debate and hope. It's fun to expect the unrealistic, to indulge in the fantasy of what we richly desire, but it's also unfair. It's unfair to ourselves and to the people making the games. There's bound to be forced disappointment, threatening the joy of any experience right out the gate.

Resident Evil 5 is already being vilified in some circles, and the game isn't even out yet. If it's not as good as Resident Evil 4, then it must not be worth your time. The control scheme is a little limiting, so the entire game is now a giant letdown and without merit. Maybe that's fair in some ways—elegant control is a gateway to losing yourself to the world—but it's also knee-jerk villainy. Every single giant franchise will not hand you the answer to perfection every time out. Compromise is everything in this industry, and will continue to be for a long time to come. The hype parade is a wild and increasingly interesting bunch these days. Its march can be so loud on both sides of the line that you begin to lose focus on what actually defines a good game and make demands that are unrealistic and misguided. And in the process, lose sight of where some of the real problems in this industry fester.

Look at Killzone 2. People are loving the game. I've had readers email me about how it's the most extraordinary first-person shooter they have ever played; they drew this inexorable fact from the demo, it would seem. If you browse early comments for Killzone 2, the ones that are vilified make mention that the game doesn't do anything inventive, that it looks wonderful but lacks original ideas. But no matter, because it's so much fun, and the multiplayer is great, and it has such crazy tech.

What Killzone 2 offers in droves is superb craft. What a lot of these big games nowadays do possess is superb craft. But why are we at a place where we so easily forgive these rehashed worlds, where the same technique and same visual choices and same settings keep popping out of the recycling bin?

Video games can transport us anywhere the designer wants us to go. Some argue that dipping too heavily into deep fantasy turns off too many people; it is written that people want to connect to reality, to machismo fantasies of beefy dudes puking up dumb-ass dialogue. No one wants to be an evolved space alien from the year 2929. Hard to get too hyped up on that one, I guess.

We live in a magnificent real world where most of us will never get to go outside of our comfortable home and experi-

"No one wants to be an evolved space alien from the year 2929."

ence something exotic, something foreign, something mysterious. It's disappointing that the virtual world doesn't latch onto the compelling reality around us with more vision and variety—whether it's drawing a past, present or future place for us to explore with our game mechanics. I like a lot of the big-title games in big ways, but I'm not invested in them like I yearn to be, because I'm bored with seeing these same spaces borrowing from everything before it.

I'm having a lot of fun with a lot of games, but I'm anxiously waiting for the next game that deserves the hype.

~Brady Fiechter

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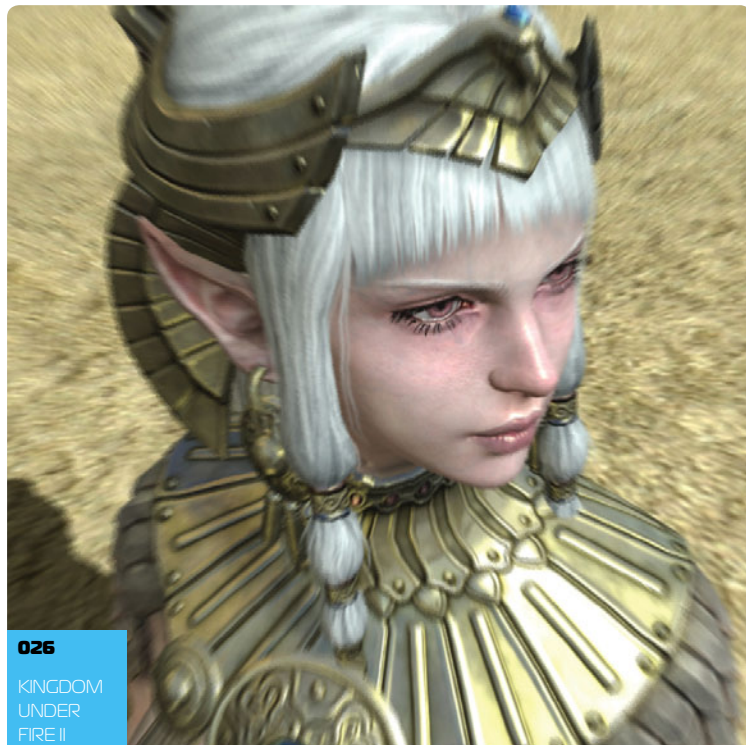
PlayStation®2



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FEATURE

**the good, the bad,
and the ugly 2009**



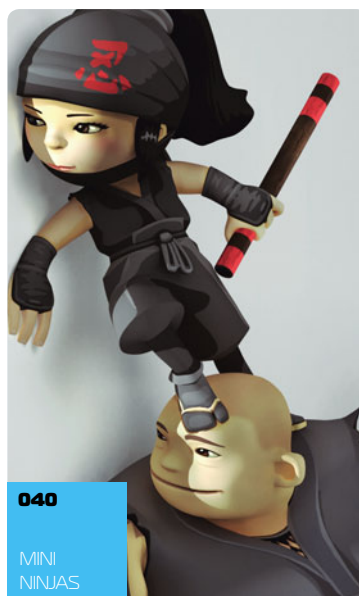
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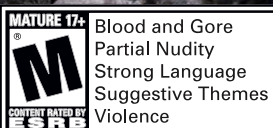
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Street Fighter IV Hits Gamestop

Gamestop continued the Street Fighter IV love (Capcom shipped out 2 million copies worth of love worldwide), setting up tournaments in over 2,400 of its stores, which began February 21. The top ten winners will battle it out at the national grand finals in San Francisco on April 18.

At a party at the Gamestop flagship store in Universal CityWalk, for the launch of Street Fighter IV diehard fans hit the stage, decked out as their favorite character. The main event was a 64-player tournament, won by Ryan Gutierrez, now on his way to the finals. It's good to see the classic love alive and well...



High Rolling DICE Declares LittleBigPlanet the Best

Game developers take over the Vegas strip

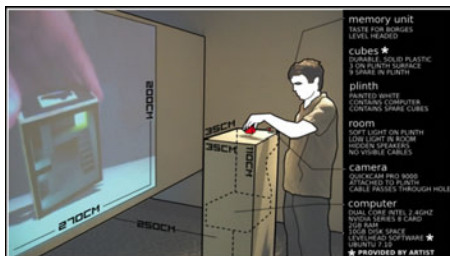
The intimate, developer-driven DICE Summit in Las Vegas was a great one this year, its 12th and—with the recession hanging in the air—perhaps most interesting. The summit kicked off with Resident Evil 5 producer Jun Takeuchi expressing Capcom's continued efforts to reach the western audience, and just how much more important that goal means for the success of Japanese developers in general. Takeuchi claimed that total software sales in Japan across the board for local developers is only around six percent of the global market; Capcom endeavors to reach 70 percent of their total future software sales in the foreign marketplace.

Valve head Gabe Newell was unusually forthcoming in his speech about the company's experimentation with Steam and how a recent Left 4 Dead weekend half-off sale rocketed sales of the game past its initial first-week release numbers. Newell is a big believer in the digital download space, speaking with authority that it's a key part of the future of gaming. He hinted that games might be too expensive and inflexible in their current guise as well.

One of the more interesting stats to come out of DICE came from Greg Short, executive chairman and co-founder of Electronic Entertainment Design and Research, who commented that human characters drastically dominate our gaming space. One of those human character leads to get props at the 12th Annual 12th Annual Interactive Achievement Awards was Faith from Mirror's Edge, which was honored as adventure game of the year. LittleBigPlanet took several honors, including overall game of the year, best art direction, and outstanding direction. Dead Space took one for sound design and one for best action game, while the pint-sized Braid was honored as the best casual game of the year. Rounding out the major game of the year category, Left 4 Dead took PC while Fallout 3 took best RPG.

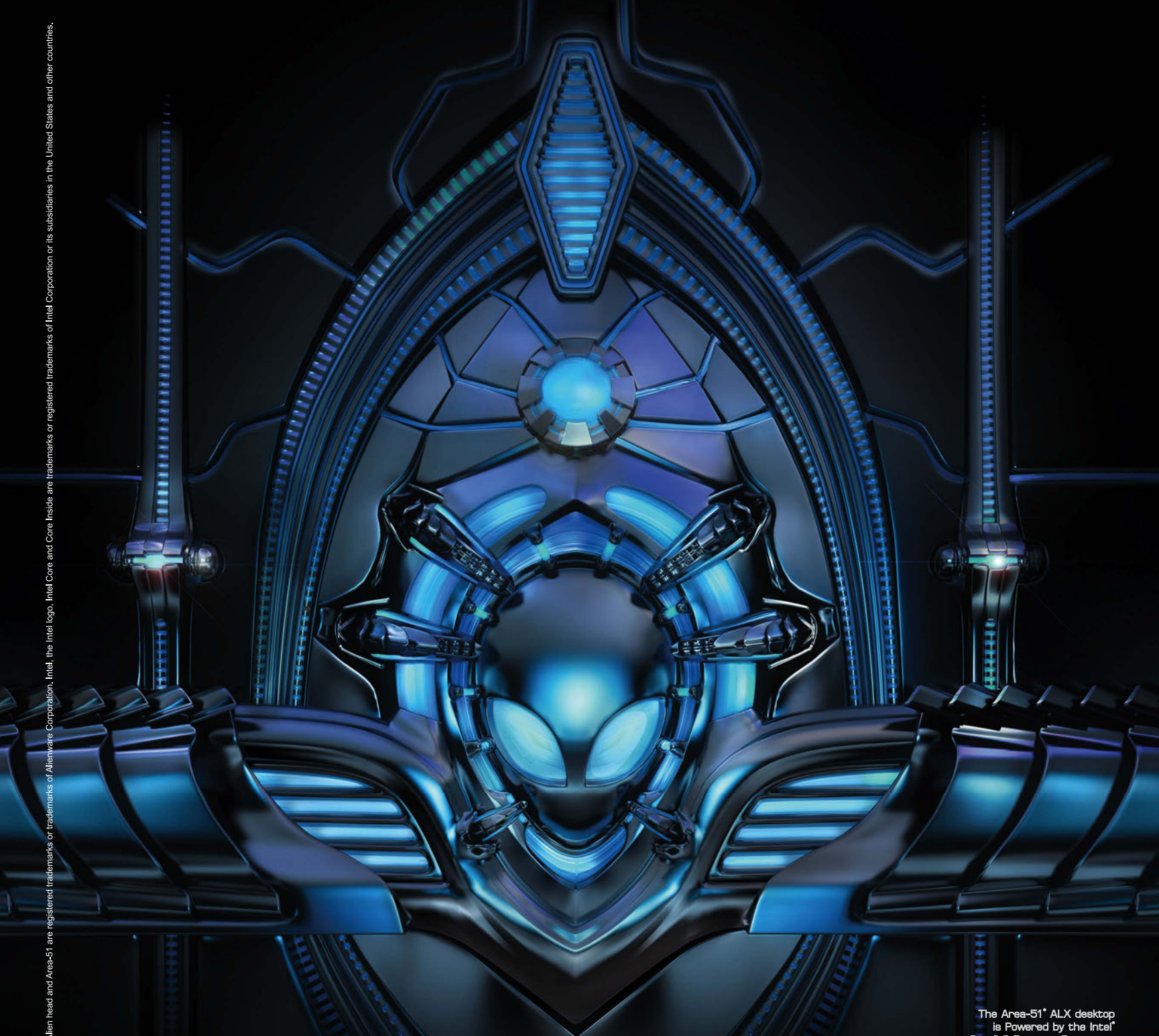


IndieCade 2009, live the dream



All you inspiring game designers with a love of the more esoteric need to head over to www.indiecade.com and learn how to submit your work for the IndieCade 2009 interactive media festival, which will take winners' visions to such exhibition spots as IndieCade E3, Asia, and New Orleans. The flagship event will take place in October, with submissions closing April 30.

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I never thought that I'd be writing a letter to a video game magazine, but I wanted to respond to the brief but dire-sounding article in your March 2009 issue. This article reports on a study by Brigham Young's Laura Walker which found an association between video game play and relationship difficulties, marijuana smoking, and low self-esteem in females.

First, although your readership may not be the most likely to pick up scientific studies, I'd encourage folks who are interested to read the actual article. While I haven't been able to lay my hands on the article yet (as it just came out), Dr. Walker is a fine scholar who interprets her own results much more completely and responsibly than most media outlets will do in summarizing it.

The main point I want to make is that it is obvious from media reports that the design of this study was correlational—they assessed 813 college students as to their frequency of video-game playing, relationship issues, substance use, self-esteem, etc... Such a study can show whether or not certain variables (video gaming and pot smoking, for example) co-occur—whether one tends to increase as the other tends to increase—but as any introductory statistics student can tell you, such a design does not allow you to make statements about whether one of those variables causes the other to occur. Correlation does not imply causation.

What this means is that this study cannot tell us about the "negative effects of video games." It can document a higher occurrence of relationship problems, low self-

esteem, and pot use in video game players, but cannot suggest that video games *cause* any of these things to happen. In fact, there are *lots* of other very tenable explanations: when you're having relationship problems, you may have more free time to spend playing video games; people who smoke pot may like to have something to do while high, like playing video games. Dr. Walker notes some of these alternative explanations in media interviews. But the point is, this sort of study doesn't allow us to answer questions of "what causes what"—because they just describe co-occurrence. The overall implications of the study aren't as surprising as we might think, and as Dr. Walker notes, there are probably multiple factors at work. In some cases, video game playing almost certainly does contribute: is anyone really surprised by the suggestion that playing an MMORPG for 30-60 hours per week might erode one's social relationships (or employment...or hygiene...?). Alternatively, is it more likely that video games cause one to smoke marijuana, or that pot-smokers like to play video games? There are lots of factors which could contribute to the associations observed in the study.

My guess is that one major factor which I haven't heard mentioned is that of the potential use of video games as an emotional avoidance strategy. This just means that when people feel bad, playing video games can perhaps take their minds off of the negative feelings...again, not rocket science, eh? Video games are an almost-perfect avoidance strategy, in that their interactive nature captures the attention in ways that more passive forms of media

entertainment (TV, books, etc...) simply cannot. If you're looking to avoid that nasty feeling or to stop thinking about the fact that your girlfriend just dumped you and ran off with your best friend, video games likely offer a good distraction.

This is probably both good and bad. Psychologists know that avoidance is one of those things that cuts both ways. In small doses, it can help briefly us manage through the thick of an emotional crisis without falling apart. However, when avoidance as a coping *strategy* becomes a coping *style*...when the person is avoiding all the time...then they never deal with the real issues and emotions that lie at the root of their problems. So my bet is that video games can provide a healthy and useful way to distract oneself in the face of a crisis, but if we habitually use them to avoid dealing with the reality of either our present circumstances or our own emotions, problems can and will develop. And by problems, I mean things like relationship difficulties, anxiety, depression...things like that. There is plenty of data linking experiential avoidance to these sorts of difficulties.

So I'd encourage you and your readers to not worry so much about the results of this study, and instead to have fun playing games while actively engaging in the rest of life (both external activities and emotional experiences) as well. Without going into the documented effects of violent media, most video games are likely fine in moderation, and potentially harmful in excess...just like anything else. But you probably didn't need a psychologist to tell you that.

Russell Kolts, Ph.D.

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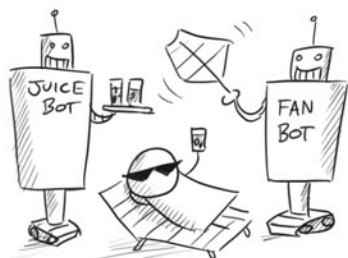
THE GAMING CLICHÉ SPOTTER GUIDE

GRIM TOMORROW

Before 1982 most visions of the future were hopeful, filled with bright colours, tin-foil suits and robotic house-keepers. It was something to look forward to. Then *Blade Runner* came along and suddenly the staple view of tomorrow was horrible and hostile....and grey. How much does your game make you want to see what the future brings?



Amazing! Either the leaders of the world actually got it right in the end or those helpful extra terrestrials finally arrived and set things straight, because the future depicted here is paradise. Shiny buildings coupled with lush vegetation and not a cloud in the sky. Life in this future would be great!



■ 500pts

It's the *Fifth Element* vision of the future in that it's kind of like now, only taller....and with more advertising. It'd be an interesting place to visit, but you wouldn't want to live there.



■ 100pts

The future here is boarder-line *Blade Runner*, the East now runs the West and there's certainly no shortage of industry, but it's clean, bright and shiny as opposed to dirty and oppressive.



■ 50pts

The cliché future here is dirty, grim and crime-ridden. The concept of home decorating has clearly been outlawed, with every wall of every room being made of either concrete or metal. Homicidal Robots, evil super-corporations, yes, we've seen this vision before.



■ 5pts

Girls Scout Cookies are Delicious



Just how delicious are Girl Scout cookies? They are so delicious that it can be difficult to stop at just one, leading to an entire bag worth of gluttonous consumption, leading to a wrestling match with the girlfriend, leading to a Wii chord wrapped around her neck. As reported in *The Statesman*, last month in Austin, TX, Daniel Alvarez, 21, was suddenly awakened by his girlfriend after she discovered he had downed her box of Girl Scout cookies. According to the initial statement, the pair fought their way into the next room where the Wii was waiting for Alvarez to apply a choke hold with the controller chord.

Take the Mario 64 Challenge!

Sometimes, a game is so good, you play it until every mode is exhausted. Every coin has been collected, every level wiped clean. You can play the game with your eyes closed, with your left hand on the buttons, right hand on the analogue stick. We've all got those games.

Some would say that when you're done, it's time to put the game away.

Others ... invent minigames.

A collection of enthusiastic Japanese gamers have taken a second look at Mario 64 and invented a mini-game that is fun enough to pass along. The goal is simple: Collect Red Coins while avoiding the Flying One-Up Mushroom. See, the Mushroom follows Mario everywhere he goes, but is just slow enough to be avoided with a little dexterity. It's fun enough to try, especially if you've got your N64 hooked up somewhere.

A collection of YouTube videos demonstrates the madness (start at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AHqzWSL639c> for your first glimpse). Why not drop in on the Play Online forums to talk about your favorite invented Minigames?

Touch controller, hurt hand

We humans like to push things a little too far at times. Why run a mile when you can run a marathon? Why eat just one cheeseburger when you can devour a quarter pounder with cheese and fries and a shake, preferably super sized? And why the heck would you stop playing your video game just because your hands hurt? You might actually want to think about that last one: in a fascinating case first reported by BBC News and treated at the Geneva University Hospital in Switzerland, a 12-year-old girl came in complaining of nasty sores on her hands. Turns out she had a condition, now called PlayStation palmar hiradentitis by the British Journal of Dermatology, that was ostensibly caused by heavy doses of gaming. The condition is an offshoot of idiopathic eccrine hidradenitis, which tends to affect the feet from excessive sweating from strenuous activity. Nyko Air Flow controller to the rescue!

Gaming Gone By File #002

words Eric L. Patterson

Interactive Digital Software Association

April 1994



Things were getting a little rocky for the video game industry in 1993. With Nintendo and their clean-cut image no longer being the center of the gaming world thanks to the rise of riskier rivals such as Sega, boundaries in what was okay for gaming were starting to be pushed more and more. One of the more infamous cases of this was

Night Trap, a Sega CD game that—while relatively tame, and not all that shocking in 2009—drew so much attention for its “violence and sexuality” that the game brought about U.S. Senate hearings looking into the ills of video game entertainment.

To help give the gaming industry more of a voice, and to help put in place a more structured organization which could represent the wide variety of video game publishers that existed, in April of 1994 the Interactive Digital Software Association—or IDSA—was born. Founded by Doug Lowenstein, the IDSA was a trade association that would work to help strengthen the industry as a whole from the threat of regulation and censorship from the government. As part of this, the IDSA later that year created the Entertainment Software Rating Board, or ESRB, an organization charged with crafting a self-imposed ratings system on all games, one that replaced the various volunteer ratings systems that had already been put in place by some companies.

In addition, the IDSA went on to present the yearly E3 gaming trade shows, as well as working together with game publishers to battle software piracy. In 2003, the IDSA officially changed its name to the ESA, or Entertainment Software Association.



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(((Developer Sound Off)))

So here's the thing about *Resident Evil*. Playing it kiiiinda pisses me off. Not because of the unfortunate effects of the affirmative action love-in I ranted about a few issues back, but more because of the fact that the core game mechanics of one of the industry's most compelling franchises still sucks so hard.

And before you hit the hatemail button, allow me to elaborate for a moment. I tend to agree with the general sentiment that the game itself is frickin' amazing. The level of detail, the atmosphere...the pure *feeling* of an RE game in action is still one of the most entertaining things we do as an industry. I love the series to death, and have spent many frantic, fun nights cleaning up after the unscrupulous umbrella corporation.

But come on, man. Do I really need to endure such a crappy aim mechanic to enjoy this thing? I mean, this is like, what? Take 12? You'd think, at this point, the constant user feedback about how they really wished the franchise would offer a controller/camera combo that even vaguely acknowledge the superior methodology being applied all around it would have made some semblance of a dent in the party line of "we like it that way."

You'd think that, but, umm... well...you'd be wrong.

For some reason, someone over there is still convinced that this is the best they can do. Or at the very least, there's an clearly an unshakable internal commitment to the clunky, illogically frustrating control mechanism they came up with in RE4 to replace the unwieldy, rage-inducing control scheme of RE games before it.

That said, the game designer in me can't think of one compelling reason why they're still convinced an aiming mechanic that puts the character in a functional body cast is somehow better than the simple point-and-shoot mechanism used in 99.9% of all action games.

And sure, I've heard all the arguments. Some say it serves as a nice hybrid between the cinematic style of the past and the action-oriented feel of an FPS. Others that the frustration of performing a basic function amidst all the chaos "adds tension." Many fans of the series also claim that they don't find the mechanic that cumbersome or simply "get used to it." And let's not forget that the continued commercial success the series speaks for itself.

The thing is...I'm kinda done with perfectly cool games that get dragged down by archaic, antiquated mechanics; lumbering their way into my gamescape and heartlessly proceeding to go Godzilla all over my shit until

The Time is Always Right To Do What is Right

words Brandon Justice

I scamper away from my console like so many panicked businessmen, and I'm equally annoyed with the people who blindly defend them.

I mean, I dunno what you consider cumbersome, but personally, when you can't shoot a slow moving target at point-blank range without considerable practice, there's just something wrong there. You play a trained, seasoned military operative, not some gimp-ass grandma with bad arthritis, stiff neck and a broken arm.

This stuff should be easy for you.

Sure, you can look past it, get good at it eventually, or hit yourself in the head with a hammer until you believe you're Chris Redfield's long lost brother and forget about all this zombie business, but at the end of the day, why on earth should you have to do any of the above to enjoy the experience?

No matter how you try to justify it, wrestling a core mechanic to the ground then choking the life out of it isn't authentic. It isn't tense. It's just *frustrating*. If you want tension, you can (and should) bring these things to life with audio, lighting, pacing, scripting, and enemy behaviors, not by adding needless complexity to an aiming system in a game that is ultimately about SHOOTING STUFF.

How on earth does that any make sense?

I feel the same way about "walking" in Skate 2. Or waiting for that stupid valkyrie to pick me up in Too Human. Or while trying to do...well...anything in the GTA series. Issues like these fester firmly on the face of gaming like so many boiling blemishes on the face of an unspeakably hot supermodel.

It's the kind of thing that just makes you wonder: Do people even play the games they're building anymore? Do

they just lock themselves in a bunker and block out every outside influence imaginable? Has success really gone to our heads to the point where we've forgotten what it is that we do here?

For me, it all goes back to a moment in my early days as a developer. In a fit of frustration at seemingly endless issues with a pending deliverable, a manager once unknowingly advised my career path with a simple statement that, throughout my decade as a game maker, has been a real staple of the way I try to approach my work:

"Don't come to me with problems. Come to me with solutions."

In a few exasperated breaths, he managed to sum up the whole of what it to be a game designer. It's not our job to create problems for the people who play our games, unless of course the game is to solve them. It is our life's work to enable an experience. To define and facilitate a goal through which the gamer finds fun.

At the end of the day, it's that simple.

If the solutions we're providing fail to accomplish that goal, or do so in a way that is blatantly inferior to other solutions that exist in the marketplace, then we're just doing something wrong.

And yeah, I know that doing the right thing can be insurmountably difficult. The people who know the most, who care the most, and who think the most about the problems we face as an industry tend to get overpowered by people who outweigh them on the org chart, and until that changes, people will still ask silly questions about why the Valves, Nintendos, and Blizzards of the world seem to have some secret formula to success.

But in case you're curious, I'll clue you in:

When you've got an annoying element in the primary path of the gamer that keeps rearing its ugly head, you really ought to stop excusing it, sack up and fix the f'n thing. If you don't know how, find someone who does and get the S#% out of their way.

It's not rocket science. It's not a cure for cancer. It's not an attempt at saving our crippled economy. It's a simple dedication to the notion of making a good game, no matter how difficult that process may be. And yeah, you may get egg on your face. Your schedule may take a hit. You might end up cutting a feature you really liked. But if you ship a game that's polished, powerful and to the point, you tend to sell more copies of a better game to much happier customers.

In the end, that tends to be the way I like it. What about you?

Brandon Justice keeps his hammer handy as the design director for the fine folks at Quick Hit Sports. Feel free to set him straight via emails to bjustice@quickhit.com...or by carrier pigeon, if that's somehow still your thing.

"It is our life's work to enable an experience."



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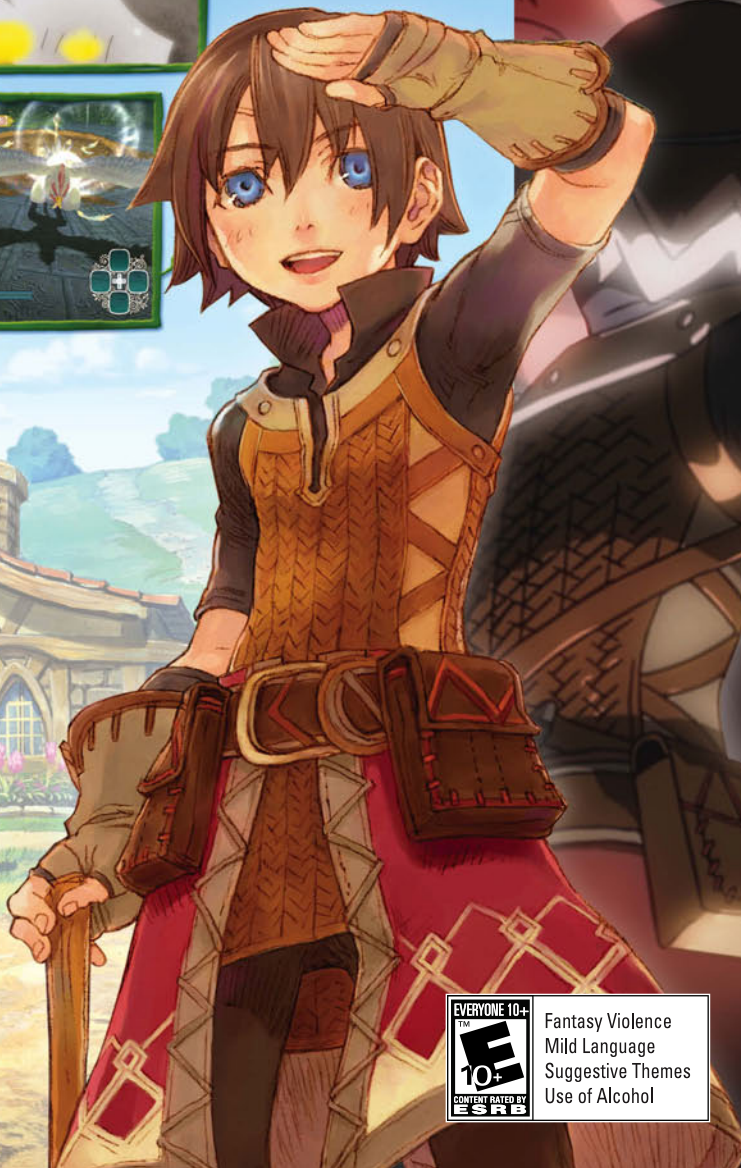


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Block 004:

Object-
Oriented
Design

romeo_check_fail

words Eric-Jon Rössel Waugh

“There is no point in catering to even a loyal community. To do so is an admission that you have nothing valuable to say.”

We all objectify the things we love. We come to rely on them, and in the process we rob them of context and dignity and substance, to turn them into dumping grounds for our hang-ups. They become touchstones, icons, existing simply to lend us context. It's not constructive, but it's natural enough. Just as it's natural for an oyster to form a pearl around flakes of grit.

This does serve a certain social function. Those who have found the same point of reference can use it as a sort of altar, a rallying point around which they can network and compare their problems; a group identity will form. You see this in small-town churches, or Internet forums ostensibly about video games or a particular band. People will talk about anything other than the topic they're there to talk about; the only time it comes up is when someone challenges the group's assumptions, and thereby threatens to tear the group apart.

This is the real challenge of idolatry; it's never about the object itself. It's about what the object represents—which is a certain social status quo. People perceive this order as necessary to justify their common humanity. If the giant head isn't on the altar, what's to keep your neighbor from stabbing you in your sleep, or questioning your heterosexuality? We're all boxes of scary mysteries, but if you know that weird guy is following the same orders as you, you can feel secure around him.

Of course, when you base your society on external justification, what you are really doing is relinquishing your own self-responsibility; anything that is not written down becomes someone else's problem. Thus develops a culture of mutual mistrust and fear. Of course anyone who is not following the same orders as you becomes suspect, because if all these dicta don't stop us from being jerks at every opportunity, imagine what it's like not to have even the rules you know!

So there's that side of things, which in such a pop culture oriented society as ours will be applied to whatever comes down the conveyor belt. Johnny Q. Gamer has too much free time on

his hands, and uses every moment of it exploring the nuances of this product that fills the hole in his life. Today's hyperlink culture allows Johnny to connect with a hundred other bored twentysomethings who use their familiarity with video games as a badge of identity. They all agree that Shigeru Miyamoto is God, that no game will ever be better than Gunstar Heroes. A certain list of truths develops, and every video game, every person who comes along is matched to that narrow template.

The culture is by nature exclusionary. It is based not in exploring new ideas and experiences, but in protecting the purported virtues that excuse the culture in the first place. Response is rarely tied to what someone has to say, so much as it is tied to protocol. Has this person checked all the boxes, and presented himself to us correctly? If so, perhaps we will deign to hear him out. Otherwise, away with him. Or burn him! Depending on how much he offends us.

And, you know, all right. People can do that. It's not constructive, but whatever. Where this culture develops in direct response to a communicative medium, though—surely you can see the irony here. Even that would be fine, for all its inanity, were it to exist in its own rightful and self-entitled bubble. The problem is that the strictures of fan culture have overflowed into the development community, and that new works are being crafted either specifically for this bunch of society, or with some mind to their sorely misplaced concepts of value.

The challenge of the creative end of the discussion is not to feed the culture and buy into the myth of The Video Game. Video games are a form of communication; the goal of any author is to exploit the tools at hand, to present new avenues of discussion. If communities are going to form, which they will, let them form around the work, as they do. There is no point in catering to even a loyal community. To do so is an admission that you have nothing valuable to say, in which case you might as well lower the signal to noise ratio and code database software for a living.

One of the first big leaps is in

realizing that game mechanics are not arbitrary—each was created to solve a specific problem. Furthermore, as an element of communication, each has its own implications. Every time the player presses a button or swings a Wiimote, or jumps on a sensor pad, or clenches his power-gloved fist, whatever happens—or doesn't—feeds directly back in to the discussion. It becomes part of a mental

map of the world and the mind set represented by the game.

This is the point and the power of the video game—in constructing unique and illustrative responses to audience behavior, thereby to craft a particular understanding of how the world works. As I've said, all art is a tool, and this is its object: to expand a person's world by presenting him with other worlds, and asking him to understand them.

The ideal of a great video game, as with a great novel or film or play, is not to adhere to a checklist of objective standards. It is not to be balanced, or to offer play value or content. It is to foster empathy, curiosity and humility. It is to offer its audience some small chance to grow as a human being. I keep beating around the bush as to the process, but I'm getting there.



world of warcraft

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NPD 2008 World View

We know how the state of our union is getting on, but what about the video game world?...Read it and don't weep.

The NPD combined video game software unit sales across the world's three largest games markets experienced growth of 11 percent in calendar year 2008 (Jan.-Dec.), totaling 409.9 million units versus the 367.7 million units sold across these markets in 2007.

The increase in growth comes from both United States and UK, with respective increases of 15 percent and 26 percent. Japan did not fare as well, experiencing a 13 percent decline in 2008, which can largely be attributed to a decline in portable software, followed by console software.

While Japan's overall gaming software market in 2008 declined, it wasn't due to poor sales on any current-generation hardware platform. Instead, the decline in Japan was driven by the shrinking PlayStation 2 software market, which experienced a 46 percent decrease in 2008 based on units. According to Enterbrain, Inc., sales for Nintendo DS' Touch Generation software series was also slightly down in 2008.

Looking at the Japanese video game software market by console platform, each system (Sony's PlayStation 3, Nintendo's Wii, and Microsoft's Xbox 360) experienced positive year-over-year growth.

The United Kingdom experienced the largest aggregate growth as well as category growth, with console software experiencing a 38 percent gain, and portable software increasing 6 percent. Growth in the United States saw console software growth of 22 percent and portable software growth of 2 percent.

In fact, UK console videogame software units are more than double what was achieved in 2003, which just shows how fast the UK market has been growing.

Because of this amazing growth and coupled with the downturn currently being experienced in Japan, the UK market has for the first time overtaken Japan as the No2 world market. Although still behind on revenue, the gap has narrowed considerably and it will be interesting to see how things develop during 2009.

#1



2008 Top 5 Video Game Titles Global Report

				USA	JAPAN	UK
01	MARIO KART WII	NINTENDO	8.94mil	5 mil	2mil	1.94mil
02	WII FIT	NINTENDO	8.31mil	4.55mil	2.15mil	1.61mil
03	GRAND THEFT AUTO IV	TAKE 2 INTERACTIVE	7.29mil	5.18mil	256K	1.85mil
04	SUPER SMASH BROS: BRAWL	NINTENDO	6.32mil	4.17mil	1.75mil	404K
05	CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR	ACTIVISION BLIZZARD	5.89mil	4.46mil	0	1.43mil

Top 10 Selling Video Games January 2009

01	WII FIT	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	WII		777K
02	WII PLAY W/ REMOTE	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	WII		415K
03	MARIO KART W/WHEEL	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	WII		292K
04	LEFT 4 DEAD	ELECTRONIC ARTS	360		243K
05	CALL OF DUTY: WORLD AT WAR*	ACTIVISION BLIZZARD	360		235K
06	SKATE 2	ELECTRONIC ARTS	360		199K
07	GUITAR HERO WORLD TOUR*	ACTIVISION BLIZZARD	WII		155K
08	NEW SUPER MARIO BROS	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	NDS		135K
09	MARIO KART DS	NINTENDO OF AMERICA	360		132K
10	LORD OF THE RINGS: CONQUEST	ELECTRONIC ARTS	PS3		113K

Gaming Culture

words Evan Shamoon



The Art of Box

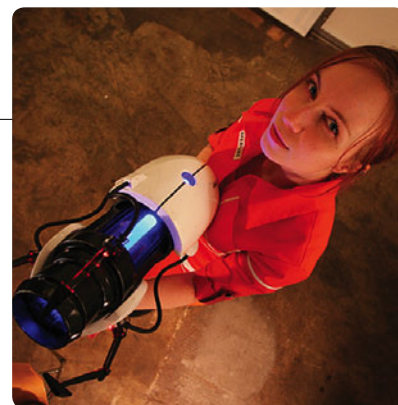
The unwillingness of game companies to take a more subtle, imaginative approach to box art has a long and storied history. Just head over to your local game store and check out the selection: virtually every box looks like it's been designed to grab your eye using a brute force combination of big characters, loud colors, and big text.

Freelance graphic designer Olly Moss had other things in mind, however, with his "Videogame Classics" series of artworks. Inspired by Penguin Classics books, simple, graphical depictions in a standardized format is the name of the game. The collection is currently six large, and includes graphical interpretations of Zelda, GoldenEye, Silent Hill, Grand Theft Auto IV, Metal Gear Solid, and Half-Life. Moss says on his Flickr page that the collection will grow to nine, at which point he will "do a big screen print." We want.



Portal to Reality

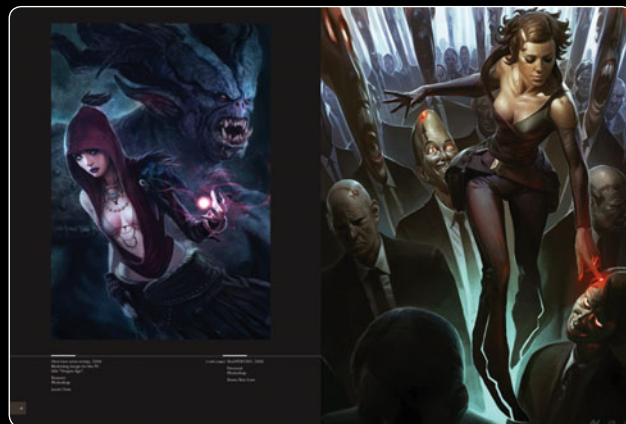
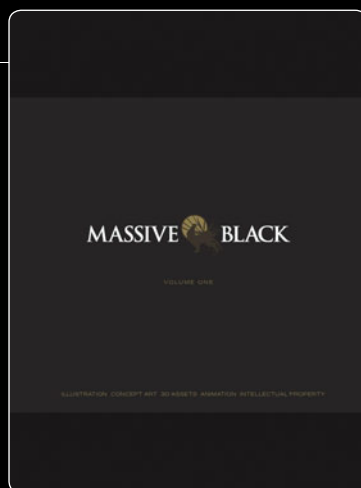
Anyone who has played Valve's critically renowned Portal (which shipped as part of the Orange Box, starring Half-Life 2) is well aware of its many qualities. The gun, whose official name is the "Aperture Science Handheld Portal Device," can create an inter-spatial portal between flat planes—that is, teleport things (including yourself) from one place to another. While Harrison Krix's real-life rendition of the device can't overcome the complexities of time and space, it certainly looks the part; the futuristic stylings and shiny Storm Trooper texture make it one of the best DIY video game projects ever. Even better, Krix actually made it for his Portal-loving girlfriend. Cue teleportation to the bedroom and Barry White's *Let's Get it On*.



Concept

By the time video games get to you, their concept art—the original hand-drawn illustrations that inform the entire visual experience—has been turned into polygons, texture maps, and special effects. Occasionally, some of these illustrations are made available in a game's "Extras" menu as unlockable items; more often than not, though, they are locked away in the archives, never to be seen again.

Massive Black: Volume One is a 190-page art book full of oil paintings, 3D renderings, sketches and hand-drawn concept art from the folks at Massive Black. While it includes work from various media, art from the likes of Dragon Age: Origins, Maelstrom, and Area 51 make the cut, to name a few. The book even includes some concept art from projects that never came to fruition, making it well worth a gander for even the busiest eyes.



iPhone GAMING

words Evan Shamoon

Rolando

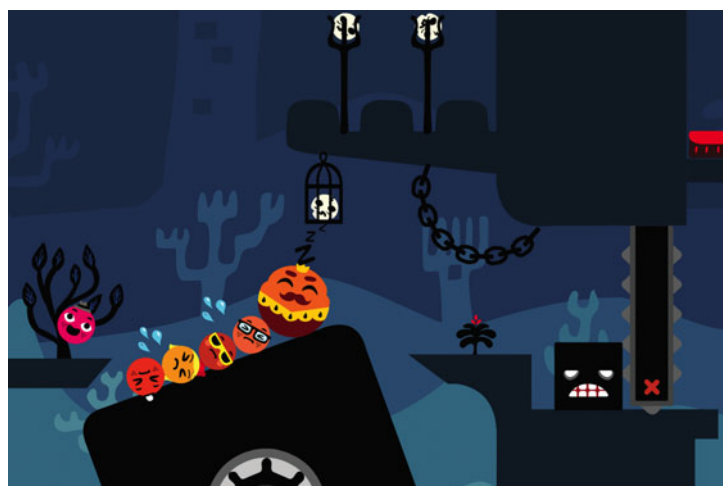
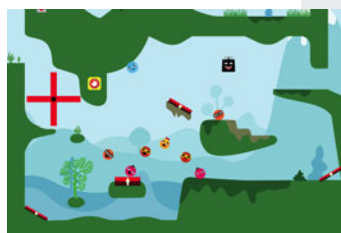
Arguably the most polished iPhone game to date is a little gem called Rolando, the latest and greatest from developer Hand Circus and publisher ngmoco:). At first blush, it comes across as much like Sony's PSP title LocoRoco, but in reality Rolando is a very different experience. Essentially, the player must save Rolandoland from an invasion of shadow creatures as the deity-like Finger (that's what the little Rolandos refer to you as). You can manipulate objects in the world (windmills, bombs, etc.), and move the Rolandos around the screen by tilting your iPhone from side to side. It's a puzzle-action hybrid, and feels like the first real killer gaming app for iPhone.

And its origin was truly grass roots: the game's creator, Simon Oliver, was working on a little physics-based puzzle game with an unofficial iPhone dev kit when, after seeing the trailer he'd put online, the folks at ngmoco: approached him about publishing the game. Some six months later, his little experiment had grown into a full-fledged experience, and the results are excellent.

Significantly, the Rolando experience feels as if it couldn't be reproduced on any other platform. It makes superb use of the accelerometer and touchscreen; as one of the earliest iPhone games in existence, though, it didn't come easy. "Obviously this is my first iPhone game, and when I started there was no App Store and nothing to compare mechanics with," Oliver told TUAW.com. "So initially it was really a matter of

making it up as I go along—trying stuff out, discarding elements that don't work. When we got to the current balance of accelerometer and touch control, everything really fell into place."

In addition to its intuitive interactivity, though, the game's level design and presentation are also responsible for much of the game's entertainment value. The game's visuals were created by pop-culture illustrator Mikko Walamies, and the game's music was created by renowned Ninjatune artist Mr. Scruff.

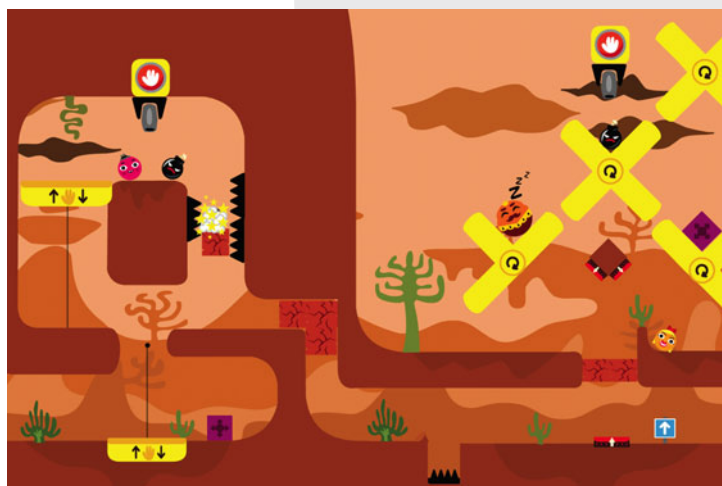


Bethesda Touches the iPhone

Here's some big news for iPhone-owning RPG fans: at Comic Con 2009 in New York last month, Bethesda Softworks executive producer Todd Howard, the man who oversaw development of both Fallout 3 and The Elder Scrolls series, announced that iPhone will be the platform for the company's next game.

Those with a hearty knowledge of mobile games might remember that Bethesda published The Elder Scrolls Travels for Java-enabled cell phones and Nokia's N-gage a few years back; whether this latest is something similar or based on a new IP remains to be seen, but be sure that we'll be watching.

Bethesda
SOFTWARES



iPhone on the Rise

Here's a pretty staggering statistic: after less than two years on the market, iPhone games accounted for 14 percent of mobile game downloads in the month of November 2008, according to a comScore report. 32.4 percent of all iPhone users reporting that they downloaded at least one game in the month, compared with a market average of 3.8 percent. Guess what that means? Lots and lots and lots of iPhone games are on the way.

32.4%

of all iPhone users reported that they downloaded at least one game in November 2008.

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the good, the bad, and the ugly

Trends of 2009

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BRADY FIECHTER

A little something good...

Indie=true rock stars

Some of the best games last year came from the indie scene, and there's no indication 2009 will be any less productive. Smaller teams and smaller games have a unity of vision that is distinctly appealing. More risks and gutsier ideas will surely mark the download space as more gamers get signed up to throw their purchasing power into the ring. And if you've been around the gaming

"My expectations are high—maybe a bit unrealistically high—for the indie space this year."

block from the beginning, getting worked up for, say, the next Strider release goes well beyond nostalgic pull. These classic revivals are a return to simpler game structures, quicker play times, lovely 2D presentations and a host of other appealing qualities that are often lost in the big-budget titles slowly homogenizing the industry. My expectations are high—maybe a bit unrealistically high—for the indie space this year. Perhaps the best part of the process: nearly every release is a wholly original work.

Friendship

When you get to be a certain age, it's tough to orchestrate a gaming session live with a friend. Kids and spouses and responsibilities and the hectic urban lifestyle be damned! But with online co-op, finding a friend to play comes down to a spontaneous phone call and a simple click on the title screen. I love it. Maybe co-op breaks the flow of some experiences, but the upside is the raucous fun of a buddy along for the ride. This year will showcase an unprecedented number of games that offer the two-player experience over the Interwebs, and developers will start getting more creative with the integration of teamwork into their worlds.

Don't fear the short

Games are going to get gradually shorter; gamers will gradually start to accept more streamlined experiences in exchange for more satisfying feature sets and smarter, more efficient design decisions. There are plenty of us who don't want to slog through a 12-hour game; there are plenty of us who don't have the time and will demand with a louder voice more adult-centric experiences.

Speaking of adults

Developers are growing up. Games are slowly, rightly, growing up. This year, games like Heavy Rain will endeavor to show how important it is to step out of the kiddie pool and into deeper waters.

Bioshock 2 is a most anticipated game of the year, if singularly for the fact that early indications show a pensive high-brow affair that games don't often reach for. With nudity and more aggressive depictions of violence often marking the "A" in Adult these days, the real test for growth will come when emotionally dense games light up the market.

A little something not so good...

Pacing matters, and plenty don't get it. What passed before no longer passes; many gamers don't even finish most games. Genre obviously dictates the track, but still—most don't get it. There remains this insistence that more enemies means more enjoyment, that more moments of action means proper engagement, that dialing up wave after wave of resistance is somehow the key to fun. Nope. Downtime is so important, contrast is so important, yet we often get none of that. A cut scene is not a break in the action; it breaks the game.

Listen to George Lucas

Sound design has always been one of the weakest links in the game-development chain. Even top-grade games like Gears of War 2 struggle to use a dense soundscape to enhance the experience, and there's no reason to believe things are gonna change any time soon. This isn't a topic that gets much discussion, but when you experience a game like Tomb Raider Underworld or Dead Space, you see just how important great sound design is. And yet most games treat the process as an afterthought—at least a budget afterthought. Rare is the game that comes even close to film-quality sound design.

Dead on arrival

Voice acting continues its amateur hour. It just doesn't need to be this way; great voice is cheap. Good direction is talent, not money. There are



Heavy Rain

plenty of actors that would work on the cheap simply to have the work. To be fair, the dialogue most have to work with is routinely poor, so who's to blame for the lack of inspiration?

A scary story

It's getting old deriding storytelling in games, but things have to change, and they will. Eventually. So much time and effort and talent goes into constructing these awesome worlds; who has time to tell spin a compelling yarn. Add to the clunky dialogue the new love of saying "f**k" in every sentence, more reliance on cut scenes to deliver the empty lines, and you've got more tin in

the ear of game stories. The idea of plot doesn't even exist right now in games.

Squads

Squads. Whatever happened to games of solitary action, where you are empowered as the hero? The AI always reveals confusion, pulling me out of the experience. The constant chatter is inane and distracting and unbelievable. The shooter sort of invented it, so now we must hack and steal bad ideas simply because bad ideas sold millions? I'm being harsh here; the squad mentality is simply anemic and underdeveloped right now. The idea will work magic someday...

Coney Loe

Three Hopeful Trends of 2009

Year-Around Release Schedule

The 2008 holiday season was a massive clusterf*ck of game releases, with mega-franchise titles squeezing a half-dozen promising games to death. I wasn't happy to see Prince of Persia, Mirror's Edge, and Tomb Raider: Underworld bomb, but at least it taught a valuable lesson to the publishers who crammed them into an already packed holiday season. Many have admitted the mistake in their financial reports and media interviews, so this may be the year we finally begin moving towards a year-round schedule of A-list releases. The first few quarters of 2009 look unusually rich, full of excellent titles that were wisely pulled from 2008 holiday line-ups, and all signs point to a saner holiday season and a smooth line-up of releases in the years to come.

The Continuation of the Status Quo

It's usually around four years into a console cycle that you begin hearing rumblings about

a new hardware generation, so in 2009 we should be learning about the next offerings from Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo. But I doubt we'll hear a peep. If the Wii has taught platform-holders anything, it's that we've hit a point where lower prices and innovative ideas are more appealing to a general audience than the next iterative step in graphics technology. But to satisfy their current audience of core gamers, they'll want that too, which means waiting until both the next generation of video cards and gimmicks like touch-screen controllers and VR technologies are a whole lot cheaper. Fortunately, no one has an incentive to rush things. Nintendo and Microsoft will want to milk their success for as long as they can, and Sony still has plenty of untapped markets to aim for with the PS3 and PSP. That's great news; between the global recession and the talented developers that are still raising the bar with their PS3 and 360 releases, does anyone actually want to move on to the next generation?

The Year of Hard-M Gaming

2009 may be the year that the game industry successfully pushes the envelope a little bit farther in terms of adult content. I'm not eager to see hardcore Wii pornography or anything, but there's no reason that the content allowed in M-rated games shouldn't correspond to what's allowed in R-rated movies, especially when the average Xbox 360/PS3 owner is well into adulthood. In the past, any movements in this direction have failed miserably, being led by trashy titles like Manhunt 2 that paint the industry as being childishly obsessed with violence. But this year's poster child for adult content looks to be Heavy Rain, a game that shows every sign of also being mature in the good meaning of the word. When the games that are pushing the envelope are beloved by critics and industry figures, the debate may unfold differently...if it happens at all. Now that anti-gaming agitator Jack Thompson has been disbarred and discredited, and the industry's self-policing policies have done a better job of keeping M-rated games out of the hands of kids than all the reactionary state laws,



Damocles' sword will fall on Japanese Studios!

the mainstream media just might choose to focus on some of the world's actual problems instead.

Three Dreadful Trends of 2009

The Impending Japanese Studio Collapse

I'm sorry for those who were laid off at EA, Brash, Midway, and a handful of struggling development studios, but I'm not concerned about the health of the western game industry. When an industry expands this rapidly, it's normal for poorly run companies to survive longer than they should, and for good companies to expand more than they can sustain. What's spooky is that we haven't seen anywhere near as many studio collapses and publisher consolidations in Japan, where they have a rapidly *shrinking* game industry on top of the same global economic woes. But I can't imagine 2009 will pass without the deaths of at least a few major Japanese game companies. And while few gamers care about the aborted line-up at Brash Entertainment or the cancelled titles at Midway, what happens in Japan could



"Casual gamers have such different priorities that they make formerly mainstream game reviewers seem like over-educated film critics who prattle on about mise en scène and milieu while their readers skim for mentions of car chases or tits."

"In 2009 ... gaming hardcore-types slowly transform from nerds to snobs in the eyes of the public. I'm not sure that's an improvement"

hurt. When the Sword of Damocles falls, it's going to land on a lot of good studios and beloved series.

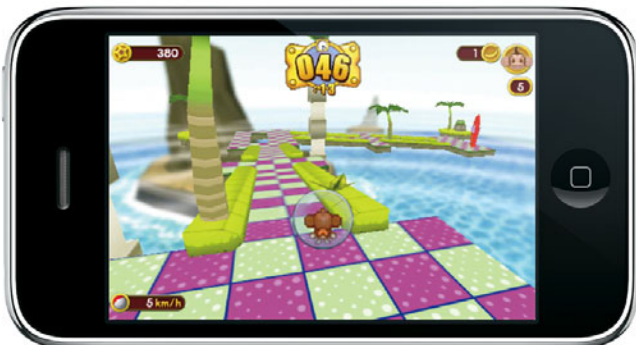
The Stealth Release

Nintendo clawed their way back to the top of the industry on the strength of a lot of good ideas...and despite a few bad ones. One of the worst is their new marketing strategy, based on research that shows the ideal time for audiences to gain awareness of a new title is a few weeks before its release, and that hyping a title too soon results in a consumer backlash. Wii Fit moms may indeed be peeved when they can't find a title at Wal-Mart after reading about it in Ladies' Home Journal, but this strategy fails miserably for serious gamers who want as much information as possible before they commit to a title.

Now other publishers seem to be experimenting with the same idea. Sony dump-releases Japanese-developed games like Siren and Afrika with barely more than a press release, and are sitting on already-localized versions of games like Demon's Souls while RPG fans are flocking to their competitors. Microsoft pulled a similar trick with Ninja Blade, and certainly isn't in any rush to clarify their 2009 release plans. As a reminder, publishers of the world: We would be happy to inform people about your upcoming products—for free—but you kind of need to tell us about them in advance.

The Marginalization of Enthusiast Gaming

One of the things I always liked by the video game industry was the way quality and innovation actually mattered. It wasn't everything, but if you compared a list of top-selling games with a list of top-reviewed games, you'll see a lot of overlap, which you won't see in the worlds of film, literature, or music. But with the rise of the Wii and iPhone, two platforms that are swimming in wildly successful crap, those days may be coming to an end. Casual gamers have such different priorities that they make formerly-mainstream game reviewers seem like overeducated film critics who prattle on about *mise en scène* and *milieu* while their readers skim for mentions of car chases or tits. There are enough enthusiast gamers that the franchises geared to us will continue to thrive, but in 2009 I can only see the rift between casual gamers and enthusiast gamers widening, with the gaming hardcore-types slowly transforming from nerds to snobs in the eyes of the public. I'm not sure that's an improvement.



This, then, is an accounting of the trends, both good and ill, in the year of our lord A.D. 2008. Place a mirror in front of them, and you will more than likely see 2009 looking back.

Positive

I. Wii, the gamers

The day of the arrogant and exclusionary "hardcore" gamer is over and done with and, frankly, it's way overdue. Elitism has no place in video games, and the sneering masses that seek to keep their hobby beyond the reach of others honestly deserve first ridicule, then scorn and finally, dismissal.

It's uncertain exactly when it became fashionable to look down on casual games or the people who enjoy them. Conveniently forgotten history shows the game industry was birthed—and grew exponentially—from titles with a universal appeal and a casual sensibility that were played and enjoyed by everyone: Pong, Pac-Man, Space Invaders, and Asteroids. Without these games, there would be no Fallouts, no Final Fantasies, no Metal Gear Solids.

The Nintendo Wii introduced (and, yes, reintroduced) a great number of people to video games, and hardcore gamers reacted as if someone had, collectively, run over their beloved puppies with a steamroller. Their petulance knew no boundaries; they whined and puled like children at the thought of Nintendo offering a platform whose *modus operandi* was wholly inclusionary rather than exclusionary. Their delicate sensibilities were wounded at the thought someone might seek to increase the sphere of "acceptable" gaming beyond their narrow world view.

Games are for everyone. They shouldn't be defined by the number of hours it takes to level-grind the androgynous waifs for that fourth, and ultimate, confrontation with the bad guy. And they sure as hell shouldn't be defined by game fans.

II. Dead, German, and, preferably, dead and German

It bears repeating: Nazis and zombies are fun to shoot. Let no one ever forget this, the Golden rule of gaming.

III. More Gameplay, less Gab

Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots offered cut-scenes that were, at times, roughly the length of a Powerpuff Girls' cartoon. The end movie sequence offered players the unique opportunity to leave their sofas, get a sandwich, pursue a degree in medical/dental assistance and, with luck, graduate with honors before the final credits rolled.

Metal Gear Solid 4 was an exercise in Hideo Kojima's hubris. It was everything that games shouldn't be and it broke what is, perhaps, the second great rule of gaming:

Games demand to be played and not watched.

Games are not a spectator sport. Neither are they movies, nor sermons on what frightens the lead designer. Thankfully, Metal Gear was the great exception and not the rule, and titles such as Gears of War 2, Left 4 Dead, Dead Space, Fallout 3, Fable 2, Far Cry, 2, etc., carried the standard for gameplay without an overabundance of hands-off storytelling.

IV. Do-It Yourself Gaming

Giving players the tools to create their own content and build their own experience is one of the simplest, cheapest ways a game can win an audience. Even the lackluster Spore, much hyped and disappointing in its execution, was oddly endearing because it allowed players to express themselves as they hadn't been able to before. And if the expression, in this case, took the form of giant, walking penis monsters, well, at least it was heartfelt.

With developers increasingly seeking to sway players away from trading in their games, user-created content should see a dramatic upswing. LittleBigPlanet and Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts highlight exactly why this is a trend to be embraced.

V. The Shared Experience

Although it's possible you might go online and experience a host of video barbarians mobbing you and grinding away obscenely solely because your on screen avatar is a spicy little 18-year-old-looking sweet young thing, it still is really good to play together.

Really, it is!

Negative

Five Trends for the Trash Heap

I. And Now, A Word From Our Sponsor

Publishers tried to push the big lie that in-game advertising would lower the cost of titles. When that bit of hokum failed, they suggested advertising actually heightens the realism of certain games. Because, you know, it's not really and truly baseball unless you can aim for the advertisements in the outfield or might,



"Games are not a spectator sport. Neither are they movies, nor sermons on what frightens the lead designer."

II. Ship it Now, Patch it Later

The patch list for *Fallout 3* addressed—and this is no fanciful exaggeration, but rather an accounting from the publisher—22 separate game-related issues, including significant crash bugs that occurred, among other instances, when the game was saved and loaded. It also tackled 11 separate quest-specific issues, yet still failed to concern itself with the ultimate goof of all: the end sequence that failed to take account for sidekicks who were resistant to radioactivity.

Fallout 3 is not alone in its "ship now, patch later" mentality. Titles such as *Fable 2*, *Grand Theft Auto IV*, *Alone in the Dark*, *Gears of War 2*, and *Bully: Scholarship Edition* all needed extensive patchwork after the fact. Game fans deserve better than this.

III. Disregard for Backward Compatibility

Both Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 promised backward compatibility. Neither has delivered to the extent promised. The PlayStation 3 has been produced in five separate models, but Sony discontinued the three that offered backward compatibility. After a brief run of backward-compatible updates, Microsoft has seemingly abandoned the notion that it should hold to its word. The last update for backward compatible Xbox 360 games was released in November 2007.

Microsoft and Sony would say backward compatibility is not a big issue with game fans. Of course, neither Microsoft nor Sony exists in a world where space in front of the TV set is limited and where, oh, some schlub in a New York suburb might want to sit down and enjoy P.T.O. IV or, say, *Crimson Sea*.

IV. The Blame Game

Casual games are killing the industry. Casual gamers are killing hardcore gamers. *Grand Theft Auto IV* is teaching kids how to kill. Used game sales are killing developers. Piracy is why we can't have nice things.

This game has been played out before. And, to be fair, everyone's fingers should be sore from all the pointing.

V. Peripherally Related

Anyone who's suffered through the agony of *Guitar Hero: On Tour* for the Nintendo DS knows full well the folly of the Bad Game Peripheral. Many games are enhanced by peripherals, but past a certain point, all the guitars, drum sets, balance boards, control holders, faux lightsabers, maracas, steering wheels, gun holders, and so forth seem more like, oh, an attempt by the developers to pay off their mortgages rather than a well intentioned stab at increasing a game's enjoyment.

heather
anne campbell

2009: Gaming Takes a Breather

Have you seen the stock market lately? I'll tell you what it indicates: This may be the *longest* generation in gaming. There has been little mumbling from Sony, Microsoft, or Nintendo about the next-next generation. Sony posted its first loss in a very long time, Microsoft is still taking a beating in its Xbox division, and Nintendo probably won't touch the Wii as long as it continues to print money. That means we're sitting on our systems for a while, kids.

This is fantastic news. I have always wanted to get as much as I could from my consoles, and have felt that each generation gives way to the next before we really see what the systems can do. Latter day development on the PS2 was shiny stuff. The final moments of the original PlayStation gave us *Final Fantasy IX*. And have you ever really looked at *Donkey Kong Country 2*? That game is ridiculous, and came out after the PS1.

So, here we are, swimming with our systems, treading water on a sunny day. I hope we get a true decade from the 360 and the PS3. I can't wait to see what they've got to give.

Five Things that will Define Gaming in 2009

1. The Economy

As outlined above, gaming is going to experience a generational lag for the first time since Atari. Great news. Sony has mentioned that the PS3 is still for early adopters, and the more I play with the big black box, the more I think they're right (streaming files from my Mac is so amazing; I was just too lazy to do it until now). Microsoft is re-inventing the 360 every nine months or so. And the longer the Wii stays in first place, the more likely we'll actually see some games on the system. So everybody: stay where you are, and play games!

2. Independent/Downloadable Games from the Art House Scene

Since games are giving up their 'gameyness' and becoming more like brainless movie blockbusters (screening *Gears of War 2* at a



multiplex is more conceivable than getting everyone together at Lowe's for *Ocarina of Time*, smaller publishers and independent games are going to be where the real changes occur in the industry. It's hard to take a risk when you're steering sixty million dollars, so the only shifts in video games are going to happen where there's little money but big potential reward. We'll all be marveling at some tiny game in ten months, mark my words. And the stuff that happens in *that* game will show up in *Gears of War IV*. It's idea outsourcing.

3. The Death of Japan

It's too bad that Capcom seems to be the only company interested in making good Japanese games anymore. Square Enix, check out the house of Ryu: They're doing everything right. The classy release of *Street Fighter IV*, the slow and deliberate development of *Bionic Commando*, and the smart handling of old franchises (*Megaman 9*, *SFII*) are examples of how to keep the engine running. We don't need *Advent Children Complete* on Blu Ray with a pack in demo, tethered to a new edition of the PS3 with a silly graphic scoured onto the side. We need *Vagrant Story 2*, or at the very least *Final Fantasy VII HD Remix*.

4. The Wii

Whatever the big Wii announcement is this year, it won't be a *game*. Sure, we might hear about *Zelda Next* or *Donkey Kong Kids* or

"My prediction: WiSticklers or WiiPaint or WiiPics. Something that lets Wii owners trade Mario Paint style original content with friends, and it comes with a pack-in, low-res camera."



Who
wants a
Wii
Sticker?

heather
anne campbell

eric L.patterson

nich des barres

"We didn't need to be stuck to the wall, staring at our character as he grinds his teeth like he's three days constipated."



whatever, but Nintendo has long ago realized that to expand the market, you need a gateway drug. You need new addicts. We should all thank the Wii for guaranteeing that there are gamers in 2019, but we don't have to love what they're doing right now. My prediction: WiiStickers or WiiPaint or WiiPics. Something that lets Wii owners trade Mario Paint style original content with friends, and it comes with a pack-in, low-res camera. If WiiMusic is Garage Band, and WiiSports is Minesweeper, then all we need is a WiiPhotoshop.

5. The PlayStation 3 becomes The Saturn

The people who love PS3 can already feel it happening. The PS3 is going to become this generation's Saturn/Dreamcast, a place where hardcore loyalists carve out a corner for games that will stand the test of time as true classics. We might like games on the 360, but we'll love games on the PlayStation. The PS3 already has the prerequisite for being the long-term darling of this generation: geeky tech fetishism. Think of the Dreamcast. Think of the NEO-GEO. Too advanced for their time, too daringly technical ...these systems were home to some of the best games ever made.

And now, THINGS THAT NEED TO CHANGE:

1. The Wii

So obvious I almost feel piggish for putting it down. Do you know? The last time I turned on my Wii to play a game for FUN, a game that *I wasn't reviewing*, was more than a year ago. I was an idiot for believing that the Wiimote meant something new for video games. It's something new, alright, but it's not for video games. Even with the WiiMotionPlus stuck into it, it's not accurate enough for gaming. Can you imagine if the first time you played Super Mario Bros. on the NES, Mario had jumped three out of every five times you pressed a button? Here's my quick fix for the Wii: Release a \$75 Controller, called Wii'reSorry, that is absolute 1:1 accuracy, and pack it in with an actual game.

2. The Demise of The Lonely Game

Shadow of the Colossus was the last time we played something quiet, ponderous, soft, and sad. Cave Story may be coming out this year

(and it *almost* counts as a Lonely Game), but what this generation needs is more of the titles that came out towards the end of the PS2 era. It's been too many years since we experienced a melancholy moment by ourselves. We don't need everything to be online. We don't need everything to explode, or be about space-time marines. We need a horse, an open field, and a five-minute gallop without music.

3. Sonic the Hedgehog

Either give us an HD 2-D game or kill him off.

4. The Cover Mechanic

Alright, so it was great the first time, and even the second time, but every game doesn't need a cover mechanic. If we wanted to avoid gunfire in the old days, we just *didn't go around the corner*. We didn't need to be stuck to the wall, staring at our character as he grinds his teeth like he's three days constipated. There's more than one way to make a game, guys. Wanted, 50 Cent: Blood on the Sand, Resident Evil 5, Dark Void ... I'm looking at all of you. Actually, maybe I'm just looking at one of these games—it's hard to tell them apart.

5. Games Journalism

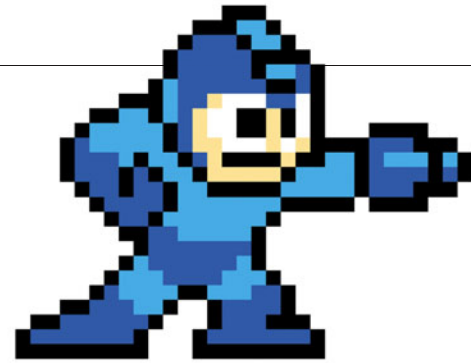
If gaming is going to mature, then the coverage has to as well. An industry-wide ban on scores would be a nice start. Maybe we could start some kind of union, with self-imposed regulations. A minimum requirement of two thousand words for any industry-approved, registered and classified game review. Let's put our minds into it, instead of just listing the features of each game as it arrives. Gaming needs a New Yorker, a Roger Ebert, an adult face to push gaming into an adult place. Romeo_Check_Fail is the right direction. Metacritic is not.

eric L.patterson

The Good

The Lengthening of Generations

Okay, so maybe this isn't an actual trend that I can prove, but the overall feeling that came out of 2008 was that this console generation is going to last longer than previous generations. Nintendo is in no rush to get a new Wii on



store shelves (unless we see the fabled "Wii HD"), Sony at this point pretty much has to see this PlayStation 3 thing out for at least the foreseeable future, and with its two competitors not likely to release new hardware soon, Microsoft can sit back and continue to make money off of the Xbox 360. I used to be the type of person who wanted the new, more powerful hardware to hurry up and arrive, but at this point, my opinion has changed. I kind of like what we have now, to be honest, and I'm in no hurry to toss it aside for another hardware restart.

SNK Goes HD

Yes, I'm actually giving one of my precious slots to SNK and their efforts in pushing The King of Fighters XII into the world of HD. Part of the reason for my doing so is, as I am to understand, this move isn't just for KOF, but for all of SNK's future fighting games. What that means is, somewhere inside SNK HQ, I can imagine that they are hard at work on their next HD 2D fighting game announcement. I can also dream that said game is Last Blade 3, since it is shameful that Samurai Showdown is getting sequels when it isn't. No matter what, however, SNK going 2D is by far the trend I hope continues to bear fruit in 2009.

Respectable Revivals

If one company showed balls this year, it was Capcom and their mission to revive a number of their older franchises. It wasn't just that they revived them; they gave each one the treatment that it really deserved. Who else would have the guts to put together a full remake of Bionic Commando, and then bring back the Blue Bomber in what amounted to a brand new NES title being released in 2009? Not only does Capcom need to continue this trend in 2009—maybe a little something called Strider perhaps?—but more companies need to follow their lead.

Reduction in music hardware

Once there was a game called Guitar Freaks, and it was close to my heart. Konami refused to bring it to America, so some folks made their own take on the game, called it Guitar Hero, and it was pretty awesome. A few years and way too many game choices later, and the shelves of your local retailer are filled with a confusing array of plastic guitar and drum kits. Thankfully, it looks as if the ridiculous flood of rhythm game hardware may be slowing down, and maybe now we can concentrate more on using the peripherals we already own to enjoy new songs in the games we already own.

The Bad

Digital Continues to Not Get Serious

Three major consoles, all three with services





to offer digital distribution of games, add-ons, and other such content. The problem is, far too often digital distribution still feels like an after-thought or a hobby instead of a serious means of distribution and revenue. On the Wii side of things, we're getting two WiiWare games a week when my Wii's internal storage has been completely full since like last fall (due to there being no real storage solution for the Wii's digital efforts), while on the PS3 I can't even begin to predict when we'll see the next PS1 game for downloading. Digital markets have no borders, so why is there sometimes such a big divide between what one country has versus another? Why has Europe had Dark Mist on their PlayStation Store since May of last year, and we in the States may never get it? If it's already in English, can't the folks at SCEA just upload it to the SCEA FTP servers or something so we can start buying it?

Paying For What I Already Own

Okay, seriously gaming companies—don't sell me content that's already on the disc. If it's on the disc, then I own it, so why am I basically re-buying it? The idea of downloadable content is to add additional elements to a game that didn't exist at the time of release in order to increase its lifespan. If I'm paying \$4 for a 108KB file, that means I'm paying \$4 to access

something on the disc I've already paid \$60 for, something that was created before the game went gold with the specific intent of making me pay for something I already own.

Japanese Gamers Ignore HD

Now, we all know that I love the DS, especially after confessing my love for it in two issues ago. The problem with the popularity of the DS (and the Wii) in Japan, however, is that at the same time far too many folks in Japan seem to have little interest in the world of high-definition gaming. I've got news for you: if I'm gaming on my television, my preference is to have games that look beautiful on said television. I didn't go out and buy a nice HDTV to continue to rock the upscaled 480p lifestyle. If Japanese developers think the future of console gaming is another 5+ years of PS2-level visuals, I'm laying the blame squarely on your HD-ignoring shoulders.

Good Companies Still Aren't Rewarded

Recently, a disturbing trend has started to gain far too much momentum: game publishers and developers that make honest attempts to bring us amazing games end up seeing those games ignored more than they are enjoyed. EA, a company who in the past was often criticized for not trying to break any new ground,

has been doing an amazing job as of late, and yet some of their recent efforts (such as Mirror's Edge) are sorely under-appreciated. Us Westerners aren't the only ones to blame; just take a look at Sega's Valkyria Chronicles, which hasn't hit it off with Japanese audiences to the degree that it should have.



Valkyria Chronicles



NICH DES BARRES

Three Negative Trends In Gaming, 2009

Japan's Increasingly Alarming Ethnocentrism

As I scan the official list of the top 100 bestselling Japanese games of 2008, the data begins to paint a disturbing picture. It is a veritable jigoku-ezu (traditional image of hell), depicting a market completely shut off from the outside world. The amount of Western-developed games in the Top 100? Exactly one: Grand Theft Auto IV for PS3 at #66. How many titles for the proudly American Made Xbox 360? Again, one: Tales of Vesperia at #82. Except for nine PS3 games hovering around the middle of the list, virtually everything else is infantile, low budget, "last-gen" pap, made by Japanese, for Japanese. Barring a sea change toward software targeted exclusively at the West, I fear the Japanese game industry will become quite like its film, music and television counterparts—assembly lines cranking out cheap product for local consumption. When was the last time a Japanese movie or pop star was a big hit overseas? Oh, that's right, never... and games give every indication of being headed in the same direction.

The Decline And Fall Of JRPGs

Since childhood—specifically 1988, the year of Phantasy Star—my favorite games have been Japanese RPGs. It grieves me to admit the genre has been on a sharp decline since the beginning of the HD era, but a new low was hit in 2008: Last year's crop of releases were symptomatic of a genre rapidly descending into irrelevance. Leave aside for the moment the fact that most of the year's offerings ranged from crap to passable (notable exceptions being Persona 4 and Tales of Vesperia), or that we were treated to gaming experiences little evolved since the age of NES. It's all about sales... and they were disastrous. Tepid business in the West would be bad enough (these games can no longer be supported by their home market alone), but Japanese sales were even worse. No big-budget, "next-gen" RPG cracked 200,000 units in its country of origin last year, and that's pretty scary. The fact

"I didn't go out and buy a nice HDTV to continue to rock the upscaled 480p lifestyle."



Infinite Undiscovery

"To make a long story short, Wii owners want nothing to do with old-school game modes, and that's just dandy by me."

that most of the large-scale RPGs were on a platform Japan has all but dismissed—Xbox 360—was certainly a factor, but even the slew of high-profile DS RPGs released in 2008 tanked. What exactly is going on here? I'll take a couple guesses: In the West, nonlinear RPGs like *Oblivion*, *Fallout 3* and *Fable II* have made the traditional JRPG obsolete, while in Japan the "core gamer" niche is swiftly shrinking in a market driven by simple feel-good party games. Where do we go from here? Well... let's just say *Final Fantasy XIII* had better be really freaking awesome.

Shovelware Rampant

Here's some fat to chew on: At least 157 Wii games were released during the holiday season in North America. Think about that for a moment. Let it settle in. One hundred and fifty-seven Wii games. Such complete supply channel saturation probably hasn't been seen since the glut of trash that brought about the fall of Atari. What is a retailer to do when "Hotel for Dogs" and "Paws and Claws Pet Resort" release on the same day? "My Fitness Coach" and "Jillian Michaels Fitness Ultimatum 2009"? What about blatant Guitar Hero and Rock Band copycats like "PopStar Guitar" and "Ultimate Band"? How many "Imagine" and "Petz" games can the market really support? I won't be as alarmist as to suggest a second video game crash might be looming, but you can be damn sure "games" like these are going to jostle for shelf space with—and possibly muscle out—truly worthy niche titles like *Muramasa: The Demon Blade*, *Little King's Story*, and *Arc Rise Phantasia*. And man oh man, don't get me started on the metric ton of offal that hits the Japanese DS every single week...

Three Positive Trends In Gaming, 2009

The Age Of DLC Dawns

A fair amount of doom and gloom is spouted about "next-gen" game development crushing creativity underfoot. Why take risks when such enormous sums of money are involved? A safe, sequel-driven marketplace is guaranteed

to generate money, right? According to these grim prophecies, we're in for FPS after FPS after incremental Madden upgrade until the end of time. Funny—in the last year I've been tickled thoroughly pink by the innovation manifesting itself on Xbox Live Arcade, PlayStation Network and WiiWare. Really, folks... can anyone deny that games like *Braid*, *World of Goo*, *The Last Guy* and the upcoming *Noby Noby Boy* are anything less than wildly original? DLC is here, it's expanding, and it's where the hugely inventive game auteurs of tomorrow strut their stuff alongside the seasoned veterans giving us *Mega Man 9*, *Omega Five* and *Rez HD*. Is creativity in game development being squelched by "next-gen"? Au contraire: We're just getting started, and DLC is providing the platform.

PSP's Second (Japanese) Wind

The bestselling Japanese game last year was for PSP: Capcom's *Monster Hunter Portable 2nd G*, with 2.45 million units. Other high-profile 2008 titles like *Dissidia Final Fantasy* and *Phantasy Star Portable* have passed 800,000 and 600,000 units, respectively—no chump change in a country where sales of 100,000 is considered a sizable hit. As 2009

dawns, it's all but official: In the handheld-centric Japan, PSP is the de facto choice for the traditional gamer. Quite a stunning comeback for a platform steamrolled by the DS, which began in late 2007 with the simultaneous release of *Crisis Core -Final Fantasy VII-* and the "Slim & Lite" PSP-2000. For almost all of 2008, PSP was the bestselling game hardware week over week, and as a result core gamer-targeted software is being announced for the platform in droves. Whether or not the PSP's second wind will waft its way across the Pacific to American shores nobody can say, but at the very least some Japanese developers will be freed from pop candy happy family pastel DS edutainment-a-go-go.

Wii Owners Reject Traditional Games

You might be wondering why an outwardly negative trend is in my "positive" list. It's quite simple: I don't want to play traditional games on Wii, and I suspect few longtime gamers do. I have scant interest in hooking up a Classic Controller to play inferior versions of franchise titles that could be done better on PS3 or 360, much less flail my arms about muddling through game genres that have no business coming anywhere near motion control. The Wii is for games tailored to its very specific charms—new experiences made to compliment the army of new players Nintendo has brought to gaming. Praise be to the divinities that the market is rejecting core games on Wii en masse. Titles like *Call of Duty* and *Madden* flopped hard in the West, but it's even bleaker in Japan: Over here, the average core game is lucky to hit five digits. When confronted with spectacular recent casualties like *Tenchu 4*, *Castlevania*, *Sonic Unleashed* and *Sky Crawlers* (the *Ace Combat* team's latest), I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry. Average sales for the above four games? 5,000 copies each. To make a long story short, Wii owners want nothing to do with old-school game modes, and that's just dandy by me. Listen up, third parties: It's time to start figuring out how to compete with Nintendo at their own game.



DAVE HALVerson

Are We Stimulated Yet?

The Good

Cartoon Violence!

Realistic violence is more than a trend in this great broken (but getting fixed!) country of ours; it's a way of life...it's a gaul-dern epidemic is what it is. The species is hanging by a thread. Do we really need this many games where men with guns do nothing but kill other men with guns? How many of these things can a person play before they start running around with squirt guns? Isn't wrestling on or something? Cartoon Violence is where it's at. Not only is it much cooler and wetter to watch, but it's fake! Nobody gets hurt. And guess what else? Would you like a side order of play mechanics with your brain salad sir? MadWorld is the best thing to happen to beating the snot out people since the baseball bat. That's what we call "over the top" violence.

Afro Samurai flips it around (cuts it in half, calls it a mutha f---r) the other direction and mixes equal parts pristine, nuance-laden gameplay with real-life, actual adult themes. ... "You are a CIA operative on the trail of a cold-blooded killer in, First-Person Super-Squad Detective 2:" Code Name Billy Bob" ... Not like that. As in Sam L. (I can say that because I'm cool) Ron Pearlman and Kelly Wu. It's plenty bloody; in fact Afro could slice up a whole platoon of floating torsos before you could say "Where are my FEET?" There's drama too, and naked ladies that try to kill you. You really should get out more. Next up...

Street Fighter IV

It actually worked! I knew it! See, real gamers are out there, they're just waiting until game companies wake up and realize they sold

more 16-bit games than they are now. If Bionic Commando, and Splatterhouse do well...Proof of life!

The words "Casual" and "Gamer" appearing in the same sentence

A few first-party Wii games break the bank and everyone runs for their flow chart. How many more games do you think that guy's gonna buy? Now he has Gears of War and Gears of War 2... Yeah, Nintendo sold some steppers. I was doin' that boogie in 4th grade gym class. Mr. and Mrs. Wii Fit bought Sweatin' to the Oldies too. Does that mean they're mad about Disco Sweat and Dance Your Pants off too? See any other Wii games up there? There's the two Pet Rocks: Wii Fizz and Wii Play Snorts and the same two first-party games that we all had to have because Nintendo isn't making them anymore.

New Intellectual Properties (IP) without crippling unnecessary token online garbage that sap my game

Brutal Legend (feels good just to say it), X-Blades, Velvet Assassin, Dark Void, MadWorld, Bayonetta, Muramasa: The Demon Blade, Mini Ninjas, Ninja Blade, some amazing new side scrolling console games we'll be showing you soon, and a few more I can't remember at 3AM are all in bound. So please, focus people. Last year EA actually did us a solid and instead of churning out more sequels blessed us with Dead Space and Mirror's Edge. You gotta show up.

Power to the Publishers

XSEED, Marvelous, Atlus, NIS America, D3, AKSYS, SNK, Ignition, Southpeak... Some of the best games are coming from small and mid-size publishers keeping it real for 10s of 1000s of gamers like you and me who would rather eat a booger than take step in FPS number. I'm also humbled by the enduring loyalty of Namco Bandai Games, Sega of America, Square Enix, and Capcom. Afro Samurai, Splatterhouse, MadWorld, Bayonetta, FF XIII, TWEWY, Bionic Commando, Street Fighter IV... Keepers of the magic; still keeping it real. So, Sin & Punishment 2? ...Anybody?

The Bad

More Heroine Please

I prefer heroines to heroes; guilty as charged. Personally I find it creepy that I get ridiculed for enjoying characters like Nariko or Kameo over some dude. When Samus pulled off her helmet that first time I was actually relieved... So I comment on whether or not their boobs bounce. The reason for that is that it's often too gratuitous, or rock hard, either of which



Muramasa: The Demon Blade

isn't good. We're going for practicality here, see? I figure other males might find that type of realism more interesting than the ragdoll physics when soldier boy hits his target. This is why 9 out of 10 games features some lug head.

Medium Rare?

For the last time Microsoft: what have you done with the real Rare guys? Are they still being punished because Kameo sold over a million when the installed base wasn't much higher? So it was a platformer; Peter's gone, it's safe now. What usually happens when a game sells a million copies at launch is a sequel. Maybe Kameo's in the same jail as Nariko. There's always Jet Force Gemini 2! Just please, no more Piñatas or "broad" reaching games. They didn't get where they are by compromising their amazing talent; they set the bar...I MISS RARE DANG IT!

Let the developers speak!

In every other walk of entertainment the creators (producers, directors, writers, artists etc.) set the tone. Great film directors don't hide while they make their films, nor do they horde assets that could help their film. We don't want to move in—all we can hope to be is a conduit for developers to get the right message out, so their games aren't misunderstood because somebody decided to stake a multi-million dollar project's future on a single outlet to get a "mention" on the cover. And who spends millions on a game and then decides that having the same 6 screen shots of the first level appear in every magazine is a good thing? And all that great concept art they slaved over should never be shown? And who is paying all this money to all these agencies to assure that select press who love their game(s) aren't permitted to promote it? I'm watching great games tank every week where it seems the publisher is paying for the privilege.

Online Communities

Really? Online? What, are we living at the North Pole?

The AWFUL

For the first time in 22 years there's not a single first-party Nintendo game I'm counting the days for... Now that is sad.

"Personally I find it creepy that I get ridiculed for enjoying characters like Nariko or Kameo over some dude."



Brutal Legend



Kameo





KINGDOM UNDER FIRE

II

The war rages on through
descendents of *The Crusaders*

words Dave Halverson

I love the smell of ogres in the morning...

I don't like to watch, I'm just not the spectator type. If it's my battle plan, it's my battle. If my armies are victorious I should join in the celebration and share the wealth, but if we fail I should be lying dead alongside them on the bloody battlefield. And so it shall be done in Kingdom Under Fire.

Travelling with my two officers, Ellen and Rupert, and a few of my finest troops on a mission for King Saul, we spotted one of the Dark Legion's convoys not a hundred feet away, where the tree line meets the river at the base of the valley on the outskirts of Azilla. Orcs and ogres mainly—strong but stupid and easily confused—I brought my troops to a halt in a patch of dense forest to plan my attack. Marking a position on my mini-map I sent my archers to positions on either side, and instructed my Paladins to hold just behind their camp. Leaving my Sappers to rest—their job was done—I signaled my cavalry to follow and made my way down river far enough to circle around and take them head on, coming to a halt in a low lying valley just across the river below their line of sight. The sky was a faint blue gray as the sun fought to pierce the morning gloom, and the river, though clear as glass, stood eerily still. Looking down



"...there's only one place I know of where you can live medieval, and that's in Blueside's Kingdom Under Fire."



river I could just make out the castle walls where I planned to rest and take on a few mercenaries. But first things first... Ordering my cavalry to move in slowly, the second they spot us the orcs take the bait and charge across the river right into the traps my sappers laid, skewering them like fat grey sausages. Spotting their leader, I order my Paladins to attack from the rear, to drive the battle forward. He is well protected but so am I; Rupert's killing grunts by the dozens with each swing of his 50-pound hammer, and Ellen is slicing the clumsy ogres to ribbons. If we can isolate him it'll be over fast; kill the head and the snake dies. Hacking my way through a sea of flesh hundreds of bodies thick, the disgusting beast finally comes into view. I call off my Paladins to conserve their strength and order my archers to fire on the remaining horde, then summon Rupert to give me the opening I need, and he's mine. He swings wildly, but too slow, leaving me just enough time to begin a series of one-handed sword attacks and within a minute the creature goes limp and falls snout first into the river. The remaining hordes hobble off as my men (and woman) cheer. The horses won't be drinking today, at least not from this river...

Scenes like this are commonplace in this day and age and mostly taken for granted, but it wasn't that long ago that they were reserved to the imagination—dreaming, reading a book, or in my case buried in an issue of Heavy Metal. Even now, in an era where imagination is trumped by technology and technology is trumped by the almighty dollar, there's only one place I know of where you can *live* medieval, and that's in Blueside's Kingdom Under Fire—in this case The Crusaders. Although it's often mentioned in the same breath as Dynasty Warriors or typical RTS, there's really no comparing KUF to any game, period. The scene I described above is verbatim for an early, easy battle, but even as they grow into the thousands, with massive black wyverns filling the sky and towering swamp mammoths crushing men by the dozen, everything happens in real time on the field of battle.



A comparatively tiny battle to what lies ahead, but you're still in a pinch.





Isabella, albino Dark-elf who served the vampires of Vellond until civil war rocked her world



But Kingdom under Fire isn't about battles, it's about a war.

Setting up battles in a sea of menus to command troops from on high isn't "real-time" anything. In Kingdom under Fire you set out with your troops across vast wilderness on foot and horseback, travelling to and from each battle. Not folded into a squat protagonist on a map; you're on the ground with your officers, archers, cavalry, sappers, and paladins all around you, issuing orders by moving a cursor (marked by a beam of light) to a point in the vicinity or in the direction you need them to head. You can pull down your mini map (without leaving the game) and mark coordinates or set a waypoint if you choose, but you still never leave the open world of Bersia. Commanding human or Dark Legion, you can take up the sword as Captain, Holy Knight, Dark Elf, or Brutal Lord and lead your armies freely among the open world. Engagement is child's play. Sending in your sappers to ready traps, deploying troops, and issuing commands is as simple as toggling, pointing and pressing a button. The only time you look at a menu is to manage your troops, and even the menus glisten with art. Kingdom under Fire is the art of war—simple yet incredibly tactical, but most of all, absolutely astonishing to behold.

Kingdom Under Fire II is the direct descendant of the original (2001) Kingdom under Fire: A War of Heroes for PC, although it takes place 150 years after Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders, the game that put the series on the map when Microsoft released it for the Xbox in 2004. Two additional KUF sagas have launched since: Kingdom Under Fire: Heroes for Xbox (the prequel to Crusaders), and Kingdom Under Fire: Circle of Doom for Xbox 360 (which acts as a link between Crusaders and KUF II) but for Kingdom Under Fire II Blueside has (finally) decided to return to the Crusaders formula—spiked with straight grain alcohol. Playing through the story-driven single-player (Hero) campaigns you can now directly control troops, of which there will be nearly 100 varieties, including dragons: Cycle to the dragon, press the command button, and you're shooting, no lag, no loading. The Heroes can also level-up action/RPG style (this was much needed) using experience points gained up in battle (and sub-commanding officers and troops) to boost various STATS, including those of officers and units. They've also added a new skill and spell-casting system, which bodes well if you're pining to finally control Morene or Cirith as Heroes. None have been announced outside of the core three, however, Blueside promises both familiar and fresh new

"...everything happens in real time on the field of battle. But Kingdom under Fire isn't about battles, it's about a war."

I guess they like to watch. Can't say I blame them.

Regnier, the warlord of terror; more twisted and powerful under the influence of "Encablossa."



Glen, half-elf warrior and son of Gerald and Ellen from Crusaders





Above:
3 "Kingdoms"
The Crusaders,
Heroes, and Circle
of Doom.
Right:
Building a
Kingdom Under
Fire...II



"For Kingdom Under Fire II, Blueside has (finally) decided to return to the Crusaders formula—spiked with straight grain alcohol...."



“Cycle to the dragon, press the command button, and you’re shooting, no lag, no loading.”

faces among the 18 (I know, 18! It must be a 100 hour game) playable characters, each containing a complete, and completely intertwined, story. It’s like a gigantic medieval war-torn fantasy soap opera. Rounding out the new, we finally get a reason to explore: Bersia has been stocked with extensive usable items which you can find, earn in battle, or buy (but where?) and they carry over from Hero to Hero. Definitely not your everyday ordinary drop-dead beautiful hack ‘n’ slash.

You want MO-ARTS?

What would a true Kingdom Under Fire sequel be without extensive online capabilities? *Kingdom Under Fire: The Crusaders 2* maybe? The company that defined the action/RTS is now looking to redefine it online with MOARTS (multiplayer action real-time strategy), the online mode with Mo-Art! The battles in MOARTS will be handled through “peer-to-peer sessions” wherein war is declared between guilds or players and played out via multiplayer action RTS wars (now that should be insane) while user-to-user interactions such as forming guilds, trading, and traveling in parties, will be carried out like a traditional MMO. A typical guild would have its region of influence, but of course have to protect it from other guilds thus encouraging territorial conquests, and using the spoils of war to gain more resources and prestige and grow their lands—the world map will be affected by the outcome of every battle that takes place among all participating players/guilds. So geek hats, on! By winning multiplayer battles and/or completing quests and missions in the Hero Modes, you can also earn “Electronic Game Cards” which let you mark your weapons and armor with personal emblems and bedeck your accessories and other such fantastical online hubris-connecticut.

Tell ‘em about the graphics Dee...

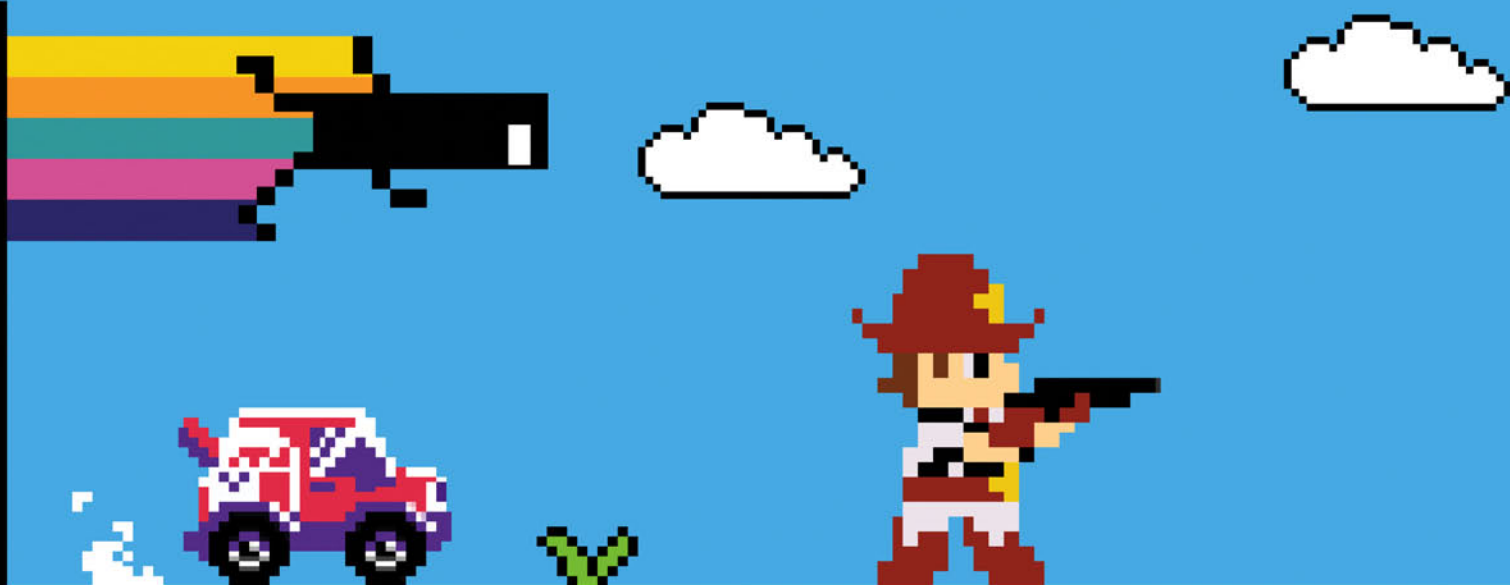
Anyone who’s played a game in the KUF series will tell you, whether they liked it or need help tying their shoes, that the visuals are astounding. Circle of Doom was a grinder for sure and Heroes was brutally hard (I much prefer Crusaders as the prime example), but they all defy the hardware gods. But can the bar go any higher this generation? We go live now to Korea where producer Dee Lee is standing by... Dee?

“The scale of the battles in Kingdom Under Fire II are unheard of in the history of war games. Utilizing our FameTech 2 technology, a graphic engine we developed in-house, soldiers of different races and fierce creatures alike all exhibiting breathtaking detail can appear on screen by the thousands, as they engage in frantic battles; and the Heroes themselves will animate in fluid and continuous motions capable of skillfully dodging hundreds of blades going for their throat. Back to you Davel!”

Alrighty, well, there you have it. Kingdom Under Fire II: 18 single-player story driven campaigns in which you can directly control not only your hero, but any of your troops, should you so desire, at any time as you make your way through the war-torn continent engaging in real-time battles that you command and fight in among thousands of human warriors and creatures.... And that MOARTS thing.

Score: 00034500

The Past



An appreciation for retro gaming—or, at least in some, a faux sense of appreciation—isn't anything new. T-shirts with NES controllers and "Know Your Roots" silk-screened onto them have been on sale at Hot Topics everywhere for years now, sold no doubt to people who weren't even alive when the NES was on the market. ytcraacker spits rhymes over thumping 8-bit beats on his self-released *Nerdrap Entertainment System* album back in 2005, inspired no doubt by a chiptunes resurrection that was already taking place.

The simple fact is this: as long as there have been consoles or games old enough for us to feel nostalgic about, we have, indeed, felt nostalgic.

Appreciation by fans of games gone by, and a targeted effort by companies to relive those simpler days of video entertainment, however, are two completely different worlds. There's always been a place in the market for retro gaming; ever since it was possible for one piece of gaming hardware to emulate in some way another piece of gaming hardware, companies have sold us titles from their back catalog for a second, third, or even fourth time. Even now, we've just seen the release of yet another retro compilation in Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection from Sega.

Yet even here, something isn't quite the same as usual. Sega re-packaging their 16-bit hits is nothing new, but now, along with those games, a few choice Master System titles have come along for the ride.

Why is this a big deal? Because the games that many companies long thought were too old or too primitive (either in gameplay or visuals) are now suddenly in vogue. Old-school, as one might say, is now the new-hotness, and both game developers and publishers are taking notice. Part of the reason this retro resurrection has happened at this point in the long history of video gaming is that the conditions are

now perfect for it to happen. Digital downloads are now a realistic option, even on our handhelds, and that gives companies the ability not only to quickly and cheaply revive games that weren't realistic options for classic game collections, but also take new chances in creating fully original titles that you'd swear you would have been playing 20+ years ago.

Mega Man 9 (Capcom, WiiWare / XBLA / PSN) is a game I'm sure you all are more than familiar with by now, but the amazing elements of this game simply cannot be ignored. Creating what is essentially a new NES title in the year 2008 as a side project is one thing; taking such a route for not only a brand-new Mega Man title, but an official ninth chapter of the franchise, was a truly gutsy move on the part of Capcom. Sure, there were some out there that were offended by the "terrible graphics and sound," but for the majority of us, it was a trip back to our childhood and, arguably, the pinnacle of the Blue Bomber's gaming adventures.

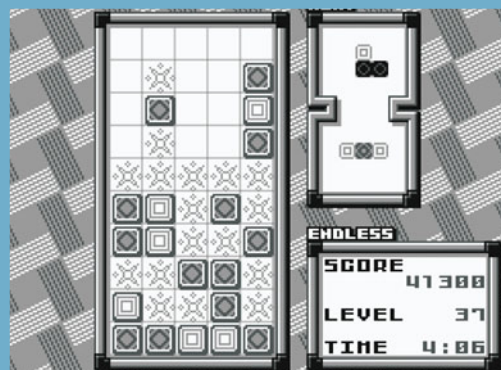
Capcom's project at least had the benefit of

a well-known name to convince those that might otherwise be dumbfounded over what they were seeing. For **Pole's Big Adventure** (Sega, WiiWare), however, Sega crafted a completely new platformer with no familiar faces to draw in gamers. Well, that isn't 100% true actually; while Pole and his in-game companions have never been seen before, the game itself is one big 8-bit gag, centered around poking fun at classic platformers—such as those featuring Nintendo's beloved plumber. In fact, Pole can even collect power-up mushrooms much like Mario, but with more unusual side effects, such as growing too big to even fit on the screen anymore, or only having growth happen to a certain part of Pole's body, one we won't mention here.

It's not known yet if Sega will see fit to bring Pole's Big Adventure to the States; however, with the low-cost, low-risk publishing potential WiiWare offers, it would be quite surprising if Sega decided to leave it stranded in Japan. Another game that isn't announced for release on our shores just yet, but would be an absolute shame if we missed out on, is **GameCenter**



GameCenter CX 2



GameCenter CX 2



Time: 670

Lives: x12

THE RETURN OF RETRO

How Old Has Become the New New

words Eric L. Patterson

The Future

Bit.Trip Beat

Bit.Trip Beat



CX 2 (Bandai Namco, NDS). You probably know the first GCCX title as Retro Game Challenge, an XSEED-published retro homage that I reviewed last issue and that, I have to assume, all of you have already purchased and played to death. For the second release, Game Master Arino has far more in store for players, as this time not only will you be playing new “old” games based around familiar Famicom (NES) releases, but also games launched on imaginary hardware that mimics the Famicom Disk System (a disk drive that was never released in America), GameBoy, Super Famicom (SNES), and more. An example of the level of detail that’s going into GCCX 2? At one point, you’ll be able to play a port of the first game’s Galaga-esque Cosmic Gate, which comes complete with little differences due to being ported. Awesome.

Talking about games that bring back memories of the NES and Master System days is one thing, but how about going back even farther? To **Bit.Trip Beat** (Aksys Games, WiiWare), the days of characters like Mario, Link, and

Alis are the wondrous dreams of a future world. The first of the new Bit.Trip series crafted by Gaijin Games, this is more along the lines of what we’d be playing if the great video game crash had never happened and the Atari 2600 still reigned as king. Bit.Trip Beat is Pong meets Rez; alone or with up to three other friends, you control a little paddle whose task is to deflect all of the dots that emerge from the right-hand side of the playing field. Every dot you hit helps produce the thumping beat of the background music; miss one dot, and the music falters a bit; miss too many, and not only does the soundtrack completely drop out, but the graphics even revert to black and white. If you’ve got nerves that



Pole's Big Adventure

can handle the immense sense of panic this game can inflict upon the player, Bit.Trip Beat will either be up on the Wii Shop channel by the time you read this, or it will be readying its debut.

With the coming of Nintendo’s DSI came DSiWare, and that’s where we’ll find our final game, **PiCOPiCT** (Nintendo, DSiWare). Nintendo has been leading the retro-styled pack for a while now with its *Bit Generations* series on the GameBoy Advance, but what makes this latest entry in the *Art Style* series so unique isn’t just the visuals, but also the audio. PiCOPiCT’s soundtrack is composed of classic Nintendo tracks remixed by YMCK, the Japanese chiptunes band that has long displayed a love for old-school gaming. Working together with YMCK on a game like this is one of those collaborations that just makes ridiculous amounts of sense, and I suppose is the best we can hope for until the world sees an actual YMCK-based platformer.



YMCK, musical contributors to PiCOPiCT

Pole's Big Adventure ©2009 Sega. GameCenter CX 2
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www.playmagine.com

Velvet

Assassin

Now you see her, now you're dead...

words Dave Halverson

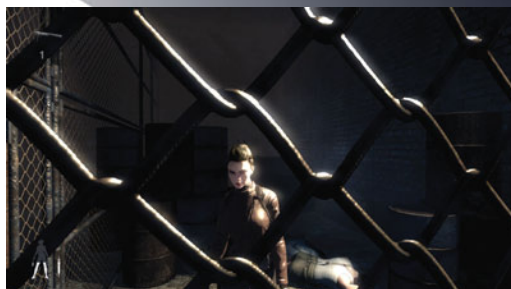
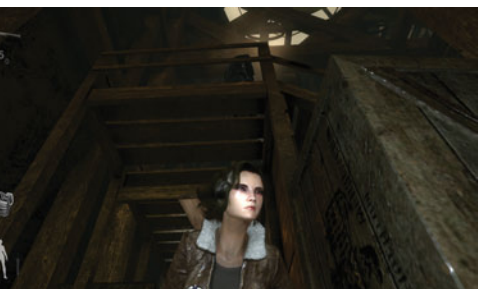
Ask a group of ardent Xbox360 or PS3 users if the world needs another first-person shooter, RPG, MMO, modern warfare, auto-racing or skateboarding game, and chances are the nays will far outweigh the yeas. Ask them if the world needs another stealth-action game, however, and you suddenly realize how nascent the 7th generation really is.

I have the utmost respect for any developer (or publisher) that sets out to create a solid stealth action game. It's difficult enough these days to create a viable protagonist, engaging environments, and a compelling universe—all of which this category demands—let alone figure-in a finely tuned stealth component that walks the razor's edge between how you perceive the enemy, and how the enemy perceives you. I'm inclined to say that I'm a huge fan of stealth action games, but saying that I'd like to be is more accurate. There simply aren't enough established brands (or new ones) in the category's repertoire to keep fans engaged on a regular basis. With K2 off the case the Tenchu series has been in free fall since Fatal Shadows (the latest installment on Wii is a travesty); Thief was a game away from epitomizing the genre when it petered out; the promising Koei series Winback was a flash in the pan; Spy Fiction didn't fly, and Rogue Ops showed promise but was undone by a dopey control scheme and poor design choices. Meanwhile, the two kings of the castle, Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell and Metal Gear—two of the most respected names in gaming—have been holding down the fort for far too long. There are dozens of great games out there that contain stealth elements, from Sly Cooper to Butcher Bay, but tried and true triple-A stealth only comes in two flavors;

and Splinter Cell, most notably Chaos Theory, is the one that made me a believer in the art of stealth. If it would have been Samantha Fisher I might still be wandering around East Asia. It's anyone guess when Sam's next mission, Splinter Cell: Conviction will finally get underway but the smart money's on 2010. And then there's Metal Gear, or at least, there used to be. No act could possibly follow Guns of the Patriots. Kojima Productions worldwide group-hug to fans (and the single best reason to own a PS3) capped the series with a level of supremacy and poise that may never be rivaled. Anything beyond Metal Gear Online and Metal Gear Solid Touch can only tarnish their amazing accomplishment—a PS3 exclusive that has sold over 4.5 million copies.

So with both 800 lb. gorillas out of the room, at least for now, opportunity is at the Southpeak Interactive gate with a battering ram. I was stoked to get a cool PS3 top-down action-shooter (Monster Madness: Grave Danger 2 ought to be a cinch now), but this is most unexpected.

Introduced by the wordsmiths at Gamecock Media Group before they were swallowed up by Southpeak four months shy of the two-year mark, Velvet Assassin was barely a blip on my radar until I laid eyes on Violette Summer in the virtual flesh—screens and renders don't do her justice—and my hands on five of the game's twelve levels. More than almost any other genre, there's a litany of components that are critical to making a great stealth game, any one of which can derail the works. Methodical and repetitious by nature (in a good way), one fatal error could drive players straight up the wall; like a JRPG hero that screams "Let's kick some ass!" before every battle...for 50 hours. The location has to be right—and you can't go wrong with Nazi Germany, in theory—and along with it the mood and ambience, which is ultimately defined by the architecture, sound design, enemy movement, authenticity, and of course the lighting. If there's one war that lends itself to the fantastical, haunting nature of gaming it's WWII. Unfortunately it also lends itself to stereotypical video-game tripe. The line between taut drama and Hogan's Heroes is a thin one if you don't know





what you're doing, but fortunately Replay Studios do, about as well as I've seen it done. I'm no historian but I think I know good dialogue when I read it, so when I ran across their bio and saw that they're headquartered in Hamburg, Germany, it all fell into place. Of course, that doesn't explain their tech. The proprietary lighting, for instance, is extraordinary. It's commonplace these days for lighting to appear overly sophisticated against historical backdrops, but the lighting throughout, and it's practically a character in the game, always feels natural, unless it's not supposed to...

The most vital single aspect of any character driven game is, of course, the character, and as a true connoisseur I

can honestly say that Violette Summer is one of a kind. My favorite characters are female, although I'm the first to admit that all-too-many leading ladies are the victims of a generation that considers rigid ball-shaped fake boobs, ass implants and spray-on tans, attractive. The best female protagonists are the ones that suit their game, not some focus group full of horny teenagers and porn hounds. Lara Croft, Faith, Gum, Shanoa, Vanessa Z. Schneider, Kelly O' Lenmey, Gwendolyn, Kameo, Nariko and Kai—the tie that binds characters like these is a look, feel, attitude, and skill set that defines the inanimate objects around them. I didn't really find Violette attractive when I saw her in screens, but when I

saw her lying in the hospital bed that anchors the backstory, I was taken aback by the aura she gave off, laying there with that blank stare; gun at her fingertips, right next to the needle. In the game, Velvet doesn't sway and bounce. She animates like a woman from the period, with hair and makeup from the 1930s and when she speaks to you through her inner thoughts she's everything you expect her to be—cool, calm, and calculating. She does this thing with her eyes too when the lights are low, like a cat ready to pounce. But what I like most about her is that she's a bit of a thief, and addicted to morphine. She needs it for the pain, and we need it for the game, in case of emergency. Morphine mode triggers a psychedelic bullet-time-like dream-state that renders Violette invincible should she find herself out of bullets and facing an opponent she can't sneak around. It's like a lifeline you try to hang onto until you find another dose nearby, or if a certain area is giving you trouble, a little Morphine will chase your cares away.

Unlike the majority of stealth games, your enemies have great vision, hearing and logic. They also like to change patterns and when angered pull you out of cover. If you're 100 feet away concealed in darkness and you flash Violette's belt-mounted light, you're getting company. Killing is done by sneaking-up (crouched) and using Violette's knife to slit throats, stab into skulls, or bury into backs or if necessary her silenced Colt single-action semi-automatic handgun is always at the ready, although ammo is limited and can only be found where it would actually be kept. There are Lugers, a shotgun, a

flamethrower, grenades, a rifle, a flare gun and other weapons to be found, too often concealed within lockers where Violette can also change (liberate) clothes.

Wearing an SS uniform for instance, the gameplay shifts to avoidance where Violette can walk among the enemy, but with caution. As she draws near or is approached, the screen hue gets redder, depicting her level of safe distance. Hiding is another dynamic. Turning off a radio or whistling attracts attention, so find a spot in the dark and when the time is right shoot a puddle of oil to incinerate or standing water to electrocute. You can pull a belt-mounted grenade pin and watch as the victim unknowingly joins his chums to go boom, or there's always the perfect head shot. Be wary though; you never know where the enemy is hiding, unless of course they're talking, in which case it's wise (and entertaining) to hear them out before you take them down, unless they're talking about, or to you, trying to flush you out...nasty bastards.

The action is taut and tense, driven by a soundtrack that spends most of its time either running down your spine or making you flinch. Auto-save points are well placed, just far enough apart to make you think but not so far that you're not willing to take risks, which you inevitably must. Velvet Assassin is anything but scripted or predictable; in fact, know thine environment is as vital as thine enemy. Peeking through keyholes before you unlock doors, watching for noisy broken glass, positioning crates to use as steps, looking for gaps in barb wire to climb fences and searching your immediate area is mandatory. Performance is rewarded with stars that, once earned, you can apply to bolster different attributes depending on the challenge: longer morphine effects, faster stealth crawling, more life... You're all she's got, so do the right thing; the look she gives you when she does die says it all.

My sole complaint this far: you can vary her run a bit, but Violette has no walking animation, so she can only stealth kill in her crouched position. For such a well-made game, this seems like an obvious fix, so it may be taken care of down the line. Such an implausible limitation seems out of character for a game that's doing just about everything right. I was fully engaged in every mission, some more than others, which ranged from an hour to over two hours in length whether it was an assassination, sabotage, bombing or escape mission. Even though I didn't have to, I felt compelled to kill them all, searching their bodies for ammo or health and piling them up in the shadows until... No more chatter—time to steal their stuff.



"But what I like most about her is that she's a bit of a thief, and addicted to morphine."



GOD OF WAR III

words Evan Shamoon

W

e're running late to the God of War III press event in Beverly Hills, due largely to the fact that the God of Traffic is not smiling upon us on this sunny Tuesday in Los Angeles. Santa Monica Boulevard is bumper-to-bumper for a solid four miles, meaning our only option is side-streets; fortunately, after a lucky turn and several moving violations, we're able to make our way inside the screening room just before the doors are closed.

Good thing, too: we're just in time to see our protagonist, Kratos, emerge from a cave cut into the side of Mount Olympus, and peer out at a battle between Helios and a volcanic titan. What follows is a spectacular trailer and a solid ten minutes of actual gameplay from

Thrice the Slice

Sony's upcoming sequel. It's set amidst the chaos and combat of the Great War, and know this: it will involve lots and lots of killing.

The team is now focused on creating the most visually riveting experience on the PlayStation 3; when the game launches, likely towards the end of 2009, it will be a good three years into the console's life-cycle. A long time to wait, it would seem, for Sony's hottest property, and one which stems from the desire to make God of War 2 one of the last great PlayStation 2 games.

The upside of the long wait, however, is that the developer has had enough time to dig its nails into the PS3's notoriously tricky architecture. The team's goal is nothing less than to redefine the notion of "scale" in games; the game includes enormous titans that represent the ultimate in boss characters (parts of the game actually take place upon their moving bodies, giving the levels a three-dimensionality and sense of movement heretofore unseen in the series). To illustrate just how big the experience is aiming to be, game director Stig Asmussen points out that the entire "Medusa" level from God of War 2 would actually fit in the palm of one of these Titans' hands. To describe the experience he and his team are attempting to create, Asmussen invokes an absurd but somehow compelling analogy: the Battle of D-Day meets the J.J. Abrams disaster movie *Cloverfield*.

Listening to the cries of GoW fans, the team is also focusing much of its energy on giving Kratos a more varied, powerful repertoire of moves and attack options. Kratos' hookblades have been the de facto option; this time, expect all the weapons to offer a similarly smooth, combo-friendly feel (we're shown the cestus, a pair of metal-ringed lion gauntlets which serve as a powerful melee weapon.) The ability to switch between weapons on the fly mid-combo should give the combat system quite a



"The team's goal is nothing less than to redefine the notion of 'scale' in games."

"We're having a lot of fun with the gore in this one."
-Director Stig Asmussen

bit more depth and nuance as well. You'll even be able to mount larger enemies; whether perched upon the back of a cyclops (read: battering ram) or dangling from the legs of airborne harpies (read: death from above), you'll be able to bring the pain in various sizes and colors.

Expect one of those colors to be red: whether it's violently ripping the enormous cyclops' bug-eye from its socket or gutting a centaur with a spray of internal organs and juices, expect this to be most violent God of War to date. "We're having a lot of fun with the gore in this one," says Asmussen, pointing out that it's not simply for show, but a representative reflection of Kratos' character.

Most impressive was the return of something the series has always been very good at: cinematography, for lack of a better term. Elements are brought in from the foreground and background with beautiful pans and zooms, never breaking the forward momentum of the experience. At one point, we're gazing upon Kratos from over the shoulder of a perched harpy; suddenly and without warning, the camera effortlessly follows the creature into the screen, and into our character's wheelhouse as it swoops in for an attack. Elements in the background aren't merely ornamentation, but rather interactive, cinematic elements of the game.

Even at this early stage, it's clear that God of War 3 will be laden with rich, expensive set pieces and spectacular graphics. Don't expect anything tremendously different in terms of mechanics; like its prequels, this third game will be very much an on-rails experience. But the sheer scope and verticality of the levels, combined with some tremendous large-scale battles make this one to watch for in 2009.

We don't expect you'll have to look very hard.



Just another
day at the
Parthenon
for Kratos.





words Dave Halverson

There's a lot more to IO's new Mini Ninjas than meets the eye, even though what meets the eye is a spectacular little action-adventure in an epic package. What sets Mini Ninjas apart is the adventurous heart that beats within its cartoon veneer as its pint-sized protagonists make their way across the vast wilderness to abate an Evil Samurai Warlord.

Based on the few areas we've seen the game looks like a cartoon brought to life, combining high-velocity (mini) ninja-action with unique adventure elements such as foraging for rare herbs and mushrooms to concoct potions, and possessing shrines to bolster your mini protagonist Hiro's Kuji magic. We'll have lots more on Mini Ninjas in the months to come but in the meantime we pulled IO game director Jeremy Petreman out of his dojo for a bit of the ol' Q&A.



When you came up with the concept for Mini Ninjas did you see it as potential franchise or more a pet project to explore a different side of gaming for IO?

Jeremy Petreman: When we first started out the concept, we were actually looking to break into new genres. Myself and a few others in the company had been working some months with the creative director, writing and drawing on different ideas we could go with. Mini Ninjas actually started a collection of drawings done by Henrik Hansen (now our art director). These drawings were early shots of a ninja, much like how Hiro looks now, and some environments which really got people excited. It was a captivating style. Soon after he came up with those, I joined him and began working out the story and early game design for what would become what we have today.

What's your take on Mini Ninja's demographic spectrum?

This was the most challenging part of designing the game, for all of us. It was very important to me that the game was appealing and fun for an 8-14 demographic

—so had that pick-up-and-play feel to it— but also had additional layers of depth to appeal to the full spectrum of gamers. You could say that if I had one worry about the game going public, it would be that people might look at it and think that it's just a kids game. That's not the case. We put a huge effort into creating a deep gameplay experience -- such as the stealth system, or the magical spells and equipment you can learn to use. Keeping it simple on the surface, but putting depth just below for people to play the game in the way that they want to.

Tell us about the visual style and character design...

The visual style very much sprang from Henrik's paintings (or from his mind). Unlike our other games, on this project Henrik was the only concept artist for the entire game. At the beginning, it was very much a back and forth process—as I was filling out the story and universe of the game, he was bringing life to it with drawings. He did sketches for all of the characters and most of the environments in the game, allowing us a lot of control over the look of every detail that we put in. It was a massive

"We put a huge effort into creating a deep gameplay experience ..." —Jeremy Petreman

amount of work; over 250 paintings. As far as influences go, we were all fairly fanatical about keeping an authentic look to everything; making it really feel like our own little version of feudal Japan.

How deep is the exploration element? Does the gameplay vary significantly if the player opts to rush?

It is a journey game, so in many ways exploration is core to that fantasy. You always know the way that you're going (generally) but the environments are quite large. A certain amount of exploration along the way is necessary to both progress, and to experience everything that the game has to offer. There's exploration on a big scale -- like branching fully off the path to follow a river through a mountain pass just to see where it goes, maybe to find a magic shrine, or potion ingredient, etc.—and exploration on a smaller scale— like finding a clever way into a castle by scaling the outer walls instead of fighting through the main gate. In both cases, it will have a great impact on your game experience.

How diverse are the levels in terms of gameplay and varied terrain? Are there many interiors to explore or does the action take place mainly outdoors?

The terrain along your journey varies greatly, from bamboo forests, to snowy mountains, to castle interiors, to flooded valleys... things are always changing. Some parts of the game take place indoors, especially around castles, but I would say that the majority takes place in the great outdoors. One other point I should mention on this is that the terrain is not just a pretty backdrop, there are specific gameplay elements which only exist in certain terrain types. In water, for example, the ninja hats become boats which they can use to traverse large lakes and rivers. There are more examples like that where the terrain plays a more specific role.

How does the action unfold outside of the combat?

Hiro and the other ninjas are able to climb on any surface that they come upon, run on walls, hang from ledges, sneak along rooftops, that sort of thing ... so in that sense they have huge freedom of movement. You'll make heavy use of these abilities around castles, as well as occasionally out in the wilderness. You will not find puzzles in the "unlock the blue triangle with the orange banana" sense, but you will come across environmental quandaries that will make you stop and think on how to take them on.

Rather than normal mapping certain surfaces and adding more effects to the 360 and PS3 versions you've opted to retain the cartoon style. Would you have done anything differently if it was a dedicated Xbox 360/PS3 game?

Honestly, the project never really evolved in that way. We spent a lot of energy early on working to translate the style from 2D paintings into the 3D world. We knew that it would have a very particular, stylized look, and felt that if we could succeed then it didn't really matter what console the game ended up on. Once we had succeeded in finding the 3D look, then we moved on to think about how we might take advantage of the hardware on each console. We only made changes when they made sense, and even then we were very careful of how far the platforms deviated from each other. Visual consistency was very important.

Seems like you're pushing the Wii to the ragged edge... Can you tell us about the engine and how you've managed to push the hardware?

I am very happy about how much we managed to squeeze out of the Wii. The environments are vast, and the dynamic vegetation and weather systems that we wrote from the ground up have let us put a level of detail into them that I think you just don't get in other Wii games out there.

How does the story unfold? What types of cinematics tie it all together or are you doing everything in engine?

The story is very much on the level of an epic quest where you strike out across the land to try and unravel the mystery of why the world is falling apart, and to eventually confront the minions of the Evil Samurai Warlord. There are traditionally animated 2D cinematics, in-game 3D cinematics, and finally you will be unlocking hi-resolution films elsewhere in the game as you go along.

I recall the music being a traditional Japanese Edo period type score. Can you elaborate?

When I said earlier that we wanted a feeling of authenticity in the game, music was one of the central ways that I think we achieved that. We worked throughout the production with a composer, Peter Svarre, who wrote and conducted all of the music. In the early days of the production, we did a lot of research, using Japanese folk music from the period as our inspiration. The music was all performed in our studios with the traditional instruments.



Dragon Age Origins

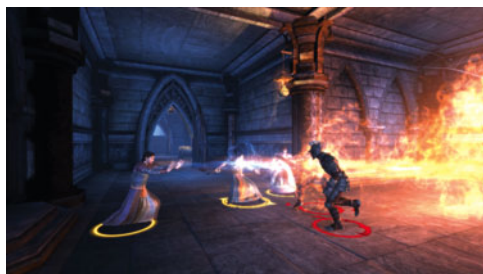
In the beginning...

words Matt Cabral

Bioware's fantasy RPG *Dragon Age: Origins* is often pegged as the spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*. But that limiting description sells this ambitious project a bit short—which will sound sacrilegious to the Medieval-loving masses who dedicated hours to leveling, looting, combating, and questing through the classic RPG. I mean no disrespect; it's just that Bioware's been pretty busy since *Baldur's Gate*, redefining the RPG genre with each release. *Knights of the Old Republic*, *Jade Empire*, and *Mass Effect* all spilled from their creative brains, so dubbing *Origins* as a sort-of sequel to a single game doesn't do it justice when you consider the combined groundbreaking efforts gleaned from all their previous titles will ultimately shape their latest project. In this light, *Dragon Age* may become far more appealing to gamers, like me, who've only discovered Bioware's unique brand of interactive magic post-*Baldur's Gate*.

As expected, that magic is cast liberally throughout *Origins*; saying a Bioware RPG will be brimming with gameplay depth, customization options, and narrative excellence is simply stating the obvious, so let's get to specifics. The title's defining hook is right in the subtitle—in fact, it is the subtitle. At the start of their adventure, players will choose an origin—Dalish Elf, City Elf, Dwarf Commoner, Dwarf Noble, Mage, Human Noble—and set on a quest entirely unique to that selection. I'm not talking a character-specific cut scene or some differing NPC interactions, either. Each origin experiences an entirely different intro game, encompassing the first several hours

"...often pegged as the spiritual successor to *Baldur's Gate*."



of play. Following this quest-shaping start, all heroes' tales unfold similarly, but the story-steering variety is still doled out like mead in a village tavern.

For starters, players control a party of four—their main character and a revolving group of three companions. Combat can be played in real-time or through a pause-and-play approach, and party members can be assigned a dizzying amount of conditions and attributes. Through a tactics menu, customization-crazy players can set when, how, who, where and with what weapon or spell a member attacks; without digging too deep, I'll just say you can, for example, program your mage to use a unique attack on a specified enemy type, at a pre-



determined distance, when your target reaches a certain health state. Wow, and I just thought the lightning bolts frying the cave trolls looked cool. Of course, *Origins* aims to be an accessible experience, so how much tweaking you do depends on your particular play style; hack-happy gamers can simply let the AI hold their own for a more streamlined experience.

Being a Bioware epic, *Origins* will pack the depth and customization in other areas as well. The perspective, for example, can be set to a traditional zoomed-out *Baldur's Gate*-like angle, or a more immersing over-the-shoulder view. Additionally, *Origins* promises sophisticated dialog trees, game-changing moral choices, and a mature narrative more in line with *Age of Conan*'s dark, violent, and sexy presentation than *Fable 2*'s fart jokes

and companion canine formula.

Despite the myriad layers of depth, my demo served mostly to display the game's undeniable prettiness, rather than its defining gameplay features. And while I would've enjoyed a taste of the conflicting moral paths, complex dialog system, and deep tactics mechanics, I was impressed by the surface appeal that unfolded before me; witnessing a band of beautifully rendered adventurers traversing the dark depths of a creepy tower, lit by flickering torches, was more than enough to stir the RPG fan in me, ensuring I'd be forging my very own origin story when *Origins* arrives in the fall. Oh yeah, and seeing the mage impressively barbecue hordes of baddies with his lightning-bolt-spitting death stick might've colored my enthusiasm a bit, too.

BlazBlue

Going down in a blaze of (blue) glory

Note: This is an edited-for-space version of the discussion Heather and Eric had on the subject of BlazBlue and the revival of fighting games. For the full-length version, please visit playmagazine.com.



words Heather Anne Campbell & Eric L. Patterson

Eric L. Patterson: Fighting games are back in a big way, but are the fans still there to truly support them? Capcom found a way to realistically bring Street Fighter back while still retaining the feel of the classic 2-D gameplay, but what about projects like SNK's King of Fighters XII, or the game we're here to talk about, BlazBlue? Are the efforts to pull these games into the "next generation" of gaming really going to end up being sustainable?

Heather Anne Campbell: I don't think it's a question of finding an audience; there will always be a small core group of enthusiasts ready to drop their virtual quarters into an online two-dimensional match-up. The problem, I think, is justifying the budget of these titles. There's something like ten times the animation in BlazBlue as there was in Guilty Gear; regardless of the process by which they achieved those frames, there's still a lot of work represented on that screen. If you're going to mainstream HD, 2-D fighting games, you have to set the bar of entry pretty low. The combo system is pretty complex, too; it relies on a vocabulary of gestures that hard-core fanatics can recall easily, but aren't immediately describable to a new player.

If you look at Street Fighter, I think its success is two-fold: Character Design and Input Gestures. The character roster is broad, stereotypical stuff that's both a little boring and immediately iconic. Friends sit down for Street Fighter for the first time, and they say to each other, "Hey! I'm gonna pick the fat guy!" and "Oh, I love that green dude." People sitting down to BlazBlue for the first time squint a little bit and then say, "I guess I'll play the attractive looking guy with the sword, as opposed to that ... other attractive guy with the sword." BlazBlue isn't going to be a mainstream hit; it's designed for the audience that's already there. It represents very little to zero growth.

The other thing that Street Fighter did successfully was gestures; what I mean by this is that the moves were a psychological metaphor for what was happening onscreen. For example, there's a similarity between the input command for a fireball and the action Ryu takes onscreen. You press down, down-towards, towards. Ryu brings himself lower and then pushes his body towards his opponent, before delivering the fireball. Zangief's pile driver is a circular input because he's

going to throw his opponent in a circle. Guile's flash kick, Blanka's roll—there's a symmetry between the gestures and the animation.

But BlazBlue doesn't have the same sort of metaphors going on in its input gestures. It's more a series of motions divorced from the action onscreen ... and as such, relies on a pre-existing vocabulary in the player.

ELP: So would you kill me if I then pondered that maybe Street Fighter IV is the Wii, while BlazBlue is the Xbox 360? One trying to make itself more accessible to a wider audience, while the other makes its living catering to a more dedicated core group of players?

HAC: It's no secret that SFIV is trying to make money. Capcom's attempting to bring in as large a group of players as possible. But anyone who has played the Challenge Mode of SFIV knows that there's a

frightening technicality to high-end play. In fact, players are beginning to wonder if the frame-specificity of combos in SFIV is more difficult than the work players had to put into SFII and SFIII. SFIV is deceptive. It looks like the Wii, because it's got all the old heroes, but plays like a very deliberate piece of equipment. I think casual players are going to get frustrated with it very quickly. But yes, BlazBlue is certainly for a hardcore group of players, with very specific tastes. You know, the kind of players who like 25-hit basic combos being performed by a faceless cat girl on a Frankenstein-Magneto robot against a backdrop of steam-punk turn-of-the-century London.

You're an SNK fan, what was your reaction to the character roster? I've always found SNK's fighters a little more ... eccentric.

ELP: SNK's creations have always been, indeed, eccentric, but they also always had some basis of

HAC

"BlazBlue isn't going to be a mainstream hit; it's designed for the audience that's already there."



"Basically, I think that BlazBlue is going to live or die by its dedication to being a totally hardcore fighting game."

ELP

reality in context to the world in which they lived. When you watch the new Batman movies, you know that a guy probably really couldn't get away with dressing up like a bat and fighting crime, but the entire time you believe it's possible. That's how I've always seen the SNK cast. With Guilty Gear—much like Capcom's Darkstalkers series—things were just taken a step too far for me. I can accept a person somehow being able to call upon fire from their fingertips, but the moment their hair can grow a hand, reach out on its own, and strangle somebody, well... that's just ridiculous!

HAC: I agree!

ELP: And yet, I came away far more interested in the BlazBlue cast than I ever was with the selection in Guilty Gear. I do, however, think that some of the roster here is feeling suspiciously like an attempt to recreate those old Guilty Gear characters without actually copying them. At least, in terms of character design.

HAC: Yes, but that's always liable to happen when you stick to the Darkstalkers/Anime-Fetish genre so rigorously. There's only so many ways to draw a dark-haired, belt-bound anti-hero. Not that I'm ragging on Guilty Gear or BlazBlue here. I've got an embarrassing amount of anime art in my apartment, and on my G1. I'm just starting to get hungry for something else in a fighting game. You know, an undignified calculator maker, or a middle-aged software engineer as a hero.

ELP: But the real question is, is that what people who aren't us want? Do they want smart and original character designs, or do they want to play a game like this and feel like the characters could be straight from their favorite OAV series?

HAC: Well put. And the truth is, I'd rather have an intricate, though slightly tired character powered by a great, variable engine, than a unique fighter that is unplayable. As late '90s as the Gothic-Lolita character Rachel was (the one with the cat umbrella from Harajuku, circa 2001), at least she had some compelling mechanics. I can't remember a fighting game where a single character had control over the level conditions. Our readers may not know what I'm talking about, so I'll explain: by performing a move with the Drive button, this little G&L girl can shift the wind of the level, drawing in and pushing away the attacks of the matched character. Playing against her is interesting stuff; her choices affect everything about your control. You leap and don't know where you're going to land.

ELP: See, I am unashamedly a sucker for Gothic-Lolita characters, so she was one of the two designs that really caught my eye. And what Rachel is able to do

with her Drive commands just floored me. It's really such a simple concept, and yet, it opens up so much potential gameplay wise. I think what has been crafted in giving each character a very specific and personal difference in what their Drive abilities are is one of the factors that will make BlazBlue so interesting, and yet, it may actually also be a sore point. When you've got a character that can control the wind, having another character whose Drive ability is chain combos almost seems like a letdown.

The whole Drive system discussion also brings up a major concern I have; this game feels complex. Like, *really* complex. Being fair, we haven't spent a lot of time with it yet, but with Rachel, for example, she had a grand total of four different meters of some sort to keep track of at once.

HAC: Yes. At times, it felt like the game was running on separate engines—each fighter had their own sets of meters and conditions for play. That could be awesome, or it could limit which characters are actually playable. While we're at it, I'm worried about the actual number of selectable characters. I think you said we've been spoiled by these huge rosters in games of late. And I'm also concerned that I'll get frustrated with the lush, yet unspecific animation, and what it means for hit-boxes and combat.

ELP: Basically, I think that BlazBlue is going to live or die by its dedication to being a totally hardcore

fighting game. Arc System Works has a lot of guts to put together a game like this, but the era that could appreciate such a project may not exist anymore.

HAC: Or maybe, given the resurgence of the versus fighter, the era is just about to begin again. If the mid '90s were a perfect storm for fighting games, and we're replicating that storm with online play, maybe BlazBlue will find a new audience after all ... the same kinds of people who picked up Guilty Gear for the first time when it debuted. People who played SFIV, but are looking for something with more character.

ELP: If there is any justice in this world, my friend, that will indeed be the case. Especially since I now won't be happy until I get an HD Last Blade.

HAC: As long as we're making a wish list, I want an HD Street Fighter III. Can I put that on the list? And a new car? I'd really like a new car.

ELP: You, being the Capcom fan, should know better than to ask for that. Some vengeful punk will just come along and punch it into oblivion.



VENETICA

Death's fate in the heart of Scarlett

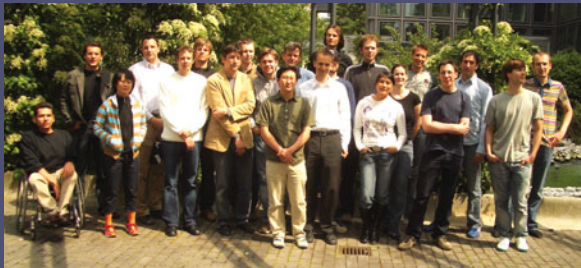
words Mike Griffin



The founders of Frankfurt, Germany-based Deck13 were inspired by classic pen and paper RPGs, a format where imagination and flexibility reign supreme. After producing several cult franchise hits in the adventure genre (Ankh, Jack Keane), where Deck13's expertise in well-paced narrative paid-off, the team started to crave more action in their adventures. Venetica can be seen as the amalgamation of all the knowledge they've inherited after growing up on RPGs and maturing as developers through conventional genre experiences. Boasting 35 core team members and dozens of external specialists, Venetica, destined for Xbox 360 and PC, is also Deck13's largest project to date.

This is the tale of Scarlett, a tragic yet powerful figure who loses the love of her life as the story begins. While she was raised among the over-world populace and bears fair human features, she is the Daughter of Death—inherently adept in necromancy and a conduit for the Twilight World and its doomed residents. This exceptional lass was trying to live a normal life, but her dark lineage proves to be an irresistible temptation for villains like Victor and his zealots, now in possession of a portion of Death's powers. Deck13 hands Scarlett's fate over to the player across a fantasy landscape of quests and characters inspired by games like Bard's Tale, Zelda and Oblivion. Read on as the Venetica team fields a range of topics in our exclusive interview.





"...a very sophisticated facial setup that allows us to animate all parts of the character's face separately—like the eyes, eyelids, eyebrows, and mouth."

Gregor Weib - Lead Animator

TWILIGHT'S LAST GLEAMING

There's plenty of spirited exploration, combat and mischief to frame Venetica's RPG systems and tightly-wound narrative, sort of like the demon-tainted offspring of Zelda and a BioWare RPG. Scarlett will scale rooftops, swim canals, crawl through catacombs, slay monsters, and face tests of morality, and it's all funneled through Deck13's Sven Hammer, a senior game designer who understands how to develop a lead character.

Interview:

Sven Hammer- Senior Game Designer

play: With Scarlett you have this strong female protagonist for players to develop. She's sort of a tragic figure with a tale that couldn't be done justice through some random player-created avatar...

Sven: That's right. On the one hand, having only one character gives us the unique opportunity to tell her specific story very clearly, dramatically and emotionally, as we can fully focus on this one person. On the other hand, as the game offers lots of RPG freedom, the character still needs to be ready for the player to mold. I think we found a very nice way to combine this, as we have lots of dialogue, and most of the time you can choose if Scarlett does things the nice or the nasty way.

You're also giving players some progression freedom, offering combat and non-combat options that advance the whole. What type of gamer will excel in Venetica: twitch action lords or clever RPG masters?

There are different ways to succeed: in essence we call them the offensive and defensive way. We are trying hard to keep them both balanced and equally fun. When playing offensive, you can solve lots of situations with your weapon, collect experience points and money by winning fights and learn powerful attack skills. If you are more the defensive type of player, Scarlett can learn blocking skills as well as defensive Necromancy spells, and you can gain your experience points and money by solving quests and also by exploring the environment. As a defensive player you will still need to become a good fighter, but if you choose to play carefully you won't need to have the reflexes of a ten-year-old to succeed.

The Twilight World is an interesting ever-present element. What's the easiest way to get there, and is Scarlett's nemesis, Victor, able to track her presence there?

Of course, Victor tries to find and eliminate Scarlett all the time. Fortunately, she can make some powerful friends. The fastest way to reach Twilight is to die in combat, provided you've remembered to collect enough Shadow power to resurrect. Your view will change to a fading, ghostly twilight, and everything around you—



especially your enemies—will slow down. You can use this time to choose a better position for your next attack, like the flank of your enemy, and then shift back into the real world to finish a fight.

There must be a way for Scarlett to enhance her powers in the Twilight World...

Certainly, there are loads of skills that enhance Scarlett's powers in the Twilight World. She can uncover hidden doors, and later see and talk to ghosts... and much more.

Does she battle special foes in both the normal and Twilight worlds?

No doubt. There are crazy bosses that she first has to defeat in the real world and who then drag her down into the shadows, where they reveal their true face—representing what their soul looks like.

OPENING NEW DOORS

Interview:

Jan Klose - Creative Director

play: Are there fundamental rules that you apply to Venetica during everyday development, things that make Scarlett's adventure just a little more refined with each pass?

Jan: Yes, there is one basic rule that stands above all else: Is it fun to play? This is how we judge every single gameplay aspect of Venetica. Of course combat is a very complex area, especially since there's a variety of things the player can do, like combo moves, skills, rolling and dodging—but still, you can judge any element by the simple question of fun. We try to extend the features we view as really interesting and exciting, something that's hard to plan ahead because only when you *really* see and feel the feature can you know if it's good for the game.

Your team members are also active World of Warcraft and FPS players during off-hours. Do you look to the most popular games in other genres for inspiration—what works and what doesn't—when it comes to Venetica's hybrid gameplay?

We definitely play lots of state-of-the-art games from different genres, but we also looked to real classics, for example the Metroid series, which might sound a bit surprising, and the classic Bard's Tale games. The thing that really fascinated me with Bard's Tale was this mysterious feeling when opening doors. You have this city, and there are doors everywhere, and you can open them all, and sometimes you discover a shop, and at other times there are monsters that attack you... With our Venice setting, we have this big city with lots of doors and rooms, so we wanted to bring some of that Bard's Tale feeling to life again.



A POSTCARD FROM VENICE

Interview:

Timm Schwank - Head of Art
Felix Haas - Concept Artist

play: How difficult was it to realize your conceptual vision for this vibrant re-imagined Venice, and how important was field research?

Timm: When we first did our location scouting in Venice, we were all stunned and amazed by this old and majestic city, full of incredible architecture. The memory cards of our cameras quickly filled. At first it was difficult to estimate how big our Venice could become in terms of technical limitations. We tried to figure out what was needed to present a credible fantasy metropolis inspired by the real Venice. Eventually we were able to create a great prototypical part of the city in a very early stage of development—summer of 2007. With the knowledge gained there, we could build an entire game world and make it extraordinary.

Felix: I was always driven by an objective not to simply reproduce the historical medieval architecture of Venice. The art style that Timm targets is very sophisticated. Of course we analyzed the different ages, with its Byzantine or Gothic influences, but that's only where the

Gondolas can be used as a quick travel system in Venetica as soon as the player finds out how to earn the trust of the secret guild of the gondoliers.





design process began. It's not so important for every single building to be realistic, but the fantasy world has to be absolutely credible as a whole. During the sketch and layout process it's important not to constrain your creativity. You can filter the results later to make them suit other needs. You still have to capture the player's imagination with fresh fantasy designs, and I think we achieved this.

Let's talk about the intriguing Twilight World, Death's domain. Given her lineage, Scarlett can move between the normal and Twilight World almost on a whim. Does that mean you've created normal and Twilight versions for each location?

Timm: The Twilight World is not only Death's domain, it's full of other powerful characters and creatures that Scarlett will be confronted with very often, in many different ways. There are different types of Twilight Worlds the player can encounter: some confrontations are set in a parallel version of the real world, which looks very different in terms of lighting, colors and effects, but which is

high dynamic range rendering, normal mapping, real-time shadows and so forth, the most important requirement for our technology was to provide an environment for the artists and level designers to build the game. We developed a brand new editor which is able to run the game while it's being edited. This completely removes any turn-around times when, for example, the lighting setup or the behavior of an object is changed. It's basically what you see is what you get. To sum it up: It all comes down to the tools you provide. Give good artists excellent tools and they will produce great content.

Does Venetica load zones between major regions, or does the engine use an asynchronously-loaded world?

We decided against streaming and load levels the traditional way. Still, loading times should not be a big issue. We are working hard to minimize them and keep the player immersed.

How is Xbox 360 development going so far? Does the squeeze for 360 benefit the PC version, in terms of optimizations?

For the Xbox 360 version we're working closely together with Wizarbox, a French company specialized in doing full game conversions to different platforms; they're actually doing the port. We made a lot of changes due to the requirements of the console which will greatly benefit the PC version. The most obvious benefits are improved overall performance and reduced loading times. Clearly the 360 has ample power and memory to support the vision we have for the game if you know how to harness it, and the Wizarbox guys do.

ONCE MORE, WITH FEELING

Interview:

Gregor Weib – Lead Character Animator

play: We have high expectations for character

allows us to animate all parts of the character's face separately: like the eyes, eyelids, eyebrows and mouth. This allows us to use a huge variety of facial expressions on any character, helping us carry over the story with feelings the characters experience. So especially in cut scenes and conversations, this will be an important part of Scarlett's sympathy and reliability.

How about your combat system? Venetica seems to lean much closer to the action part of action RPG, with fast real-time combat maneuvers. Sven told us you won't need the reflexes of a hyperactive child to excel, but close range combat skill will be important...

When it comes to action, we try to make the reactions of Scarlett as responsive as possible. Basically, when the player presses a button to strike with his weapon you feel like you're directly in control of the character, rather than waiting until the current action move has finished. We've also created a very complex and impressive animation system for boss fights, something that Zelda players will quickly acquire a taste for, I hope. The tactics you need to discover to defeat each boss is something we had to wrack our brains over. I hope the final results will be an enjoyable and exciting experience.

NOT JUST ANY GIRL

Interview:

Susie Sou - 3D Artist / Level Designer

play: Scarlett has a hopeful and defiant demeanor, this non-bimbo physique, and all those dark secrets. As one of Deck13's more prolific female members and someone with a keen sense of 3D design, why do you think players are going to enjoy adventuring with this unconventional chick?

Susie: There's an abundance of female characters in PC and console games nowadays, just as diverse in appearance and attitude as in real life, but there's a great deal of work involved if you really want a character that stands out from the cardboard cutouts. More so when developing a female character, especially if you don't want to offend the female punters. Our leading gal, Scarlett, has been through a roller coaster ride of development. I can recall some seemingly banal discussions in the past, let's say regarding her footwear. 'What shoes should she wear?' we asked. 'She'd break something if she tried to run and fight in high heels on cobblestones!' But let me tell you, the change from heels to flats also called for a not so easy overhaul to the animation system, which didn't much please our tech guys! But the art department got their flatties in the end, and it's the right choice.

I think you can really tell from the female characters in games whether actual females were on the team or not. I think we've ended up with a distinctive, sassy damsel which you will thoroughly believe can harness the powers of death. She's been molded to appeal equally to male and female gamers, but when you peer into her dark smoldering eyes you can't quite believe that she's just made of pixels!

Many thanks to the entire Deck13 team for this thorough investigation into Venetica, a game that's been starving for some proper US coverage. Still seeking a strong North American publisher, Venetica nonetheless remains on track for a mid-2009 release.



"...we also looked to real classics, for example the Metroid series, which might sound a bit surprising, and the classic Bard's Tale games."

Jan Klose - Creative Director

still the same game level. It may remind you of Lord of the Rings, when Frodo uses the Ring. In epic moments, however, Scarlett is drawn into the very heart of the Twilight World, deep down in the Underworld, which is fully realized as a whole new location.

THINKING INSIDE THE BOX

Interview:

Thorsten Lange - Head of Technology

play: To the naked eye, Venetica's engine seems to provide substantial rendering horsepower. What's the most important technology feature when it comes to expressing the artists' vision?

Thorsten: Besides the features and effects players simply expect to be there today, like

animation. We pay attention to a character's posture, the correct blending of animations, the right leg bend on sloping or uneven surfaces, leaning into turns, dashes and attacks, the tender loving care of great facial expressions. Do you and your animators tend to these often-overlooked details?

Gregor: First of all, of course we have all these technical gadgets like IK [Inverse Kinematics] legs and smooth animation blending. However, I don't think this is an essential part to make the game fun to play—though it is important to have these gadgets to make the character move naturally when the player has all the control. So proper turn, lean and acceleration and deceleration systems are all included in Venetica's animation system. However, the main focus for Venetica's characters is the expressions and feelings we want to deliver to the player.

So we have a very sophisticated facial setup that

Army of Two: The 40th Day

Unmasked

words Matt Cabral

Long before Chris Redfield realized he'd have a better chance surviving the zombie apocalypse with a gun-toting partner by his side, the masked mercs of Army of Two had already saved the world as a team. Now EA is preparing to unleash their two-man terrorist-thwarting machine, again, in Army of Two: The 40th Day. Initially I responded to this news both willing to welcome the duos' return to the frontline, but also not entirely sold on the series being sequel-worthy. That is, until I witnessed a bit of its heart-stopping gameplay in action; in a scene that'd humble Michael Bay, guns-for-hire Rios and Salem find themselves battling through a crumbling metropolis in a scenario that not so subtly hints at the game's revamped focus on "active disasters." The mission sees them capping the expected band of baddies while bridges collapse, planes collide with buildings, and civilians flee in scary-real panic. The thing is, this chaos doesn't unfold in the background like some pretty triggered set-piece to be ogled between scoring headshots; it happens above, under, and all around the players, affecting their ability to navigate the danger-riddled environment in real-time. Thoroughly impressed with what I just saw, the next stop was to speak with the title's off-screen co-op badasses—creative director Alex Hutchinson and executive producer Reid Schneider, to uncover the goods on this team-play-focused follow-up.

"I like being able to express myself in the game more than in most shooters..."
--Hutchinson

play: Please tell us a bit about the storyline and gameplay in The 40th Day.

Alex Hutchinson: The core elements for me are putting the players in the middle of an active disaster, not a war that began years ago or a disaster that happened years ago, and then make the only solutions to the problems they face revolve around working with and alongside their partner. We've focused the co-op gameplay on more organic situations, and we want to give players a bunch of options they can choose to use in any scenario, which open up new options for their partner. So for example you can mock surrender in the game if you find enemies who are not already in combat, a behavior which pulls all the aggro and attention to you and allows your partner to flank or snipe or achieve an objective behind the enemy forces.

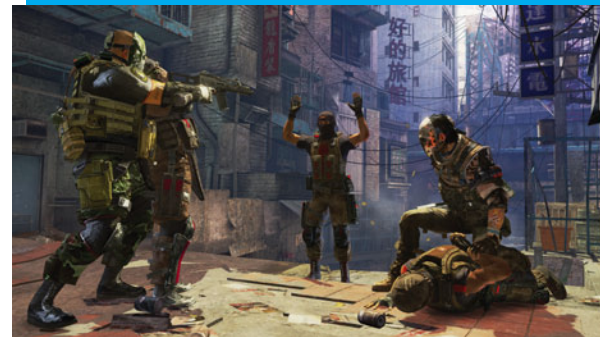
What was the most significant feedback—both negative and positive—you received from fans about the original game?

Reid Schneider: On the positive side the core idea of playing with your buddy and "You and me against the

world" really resonated with gamers. Crafting a pure co-op experience was the most important thing for us. On the negative side, the tone of the game rubbed some people the wrong way. Fortunately for us, this is the type of issue that is reasonably easy for us to fix. If the opposite were true (they liked the tone but hated the gameplay) I don't think we would be making a sequel!

Is it difficult to stay relevant as the co-op experience, when so many other titles are adding this feature? If so, how are you tackling this challenge?

AH: Many other games are putting in an optional mode or a few levels, but the core experience is still single player. We are still the only game out there that I know about with critical mechanics that are related to the interaction between you and your co-op partner, whether it's a human or an AI-controlled buddy. We want to keep digging into that so that the partner feels like an actual character, not just a faceless gun, so there are new mechanics in that area. And as I said earlier, we're trying to add not just a bunch of new co-



op moves but also to make sure they all fit together systemically so that players can use and abuse them in many different situations, so there's a lot more choice in the new game.

What are the absolute coolest aspects of the game?

AH: I think the major disaster moments that occur while you're actually inside them really up the excitement, and also the ability to strategize with a friend and tackle a problem in a unique way. I like being able to express myself in the game more than in most shooters, both by what I do, how I interact with my partner, and how I do it.

Either you get it.

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REVIEWS



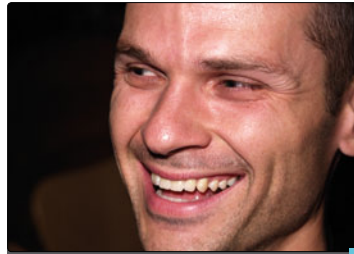
Dave Halverson
PUBLISHER

Modus Operandi: Since we're about to launch the new more net-tastic Play site I'll be changing my review tactics accordingly. From now on I'll be playing each game for at least 20 minutes (or until the on-screen prompts run out), then surfing the many forums frequented by cranky born-to-bitch ungamers to see how much profanity they're throwing at it, and then finally subtract 1% for every time they say "linear" or "no co-op" is a fault. Either that or just give everything a 5 or lower so I can hang out in the hater forums. Those guys are wicked cool man!

Brain Drain: OK, Dee: don't forget



Game of the Month: MadWorld



Brady Flechter
EDITOR IN CHIEF

Modus Operandi: There is no checklist for reviewing a game. The best game feels right from the start, and the best game is not concerned with feature sets as much as how each component is handled. If the visual space is not compelling in some way, the gameplay better be so good that it's Tetris (which offers an incredibly interesting visual space).

Brain Drain: I wonder if we could forget the word "casual" when talking about games. I have a dream: someday games are made to be good, not fit inside some box wrapped up for a nebulous demographic. A good game with good ideas is a good game with good ideas, no matter what label you want to slap on it.

Game of the Month: Resident Evil 5



Greg Orlando
SENIOR EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Here's the way of it: a game can be fun, but not good, and good, but not fun. The two really are mutually exclusive; if it wasn't the case, Mutant League Football would score a 12 out of 10 and Silent Hill 2 would score a 4 out of 14. Thank god Play eliminated its scores. Also, Greg is counting the days until the installation of Reviewatron 4125, which will finally be able to suggest that fans of the genre should, in fact, like a particular game while all others should try before they buy—in 10 different languages!

Brain Drain: Greg decided to give his space up this month out of the kindness of his big heart. Either that or he was on the road so we forgot to ask him to drain his brain.

Game of the Month: Left 4 Dead



Mike Griffin
PC EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I'm looking for convincing themes I can feel and considered polish I can respect, regardless of a game's scope or platform. I absolutely believe that games can be considered art, and a lot of great art requires a technical understanding of the canvas, instruments and stage. That's a balance I care about in a medium whose MO is interactivity. Interface is also very important to me...

Brain Drain: I recently spoke to a Brazilian editor who lamented how ham-fisted Xbox Live DLC is in Brazil. I.e., his Gears of War 2 included voucher codes for free DLC, yet the content wasn't even available on his Live. Microsoft, show some Live love to Brazil before they go Blanka on your ass.

Game of the Month: Parabellum



Nick Des Barres
JAPAN EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Hideo Kojima may not agree with me, but I believe video games can be art. Although I have been writing about them for 14 years, never have I felt comfortable assigning numerical scores; there exist no universal, pan-human criteria against one can judge works of art. The most a critic can aspire to is describing, with as much eloquence as he can muster, how the work in question makes him feel. That is my goal when I review a game.

Brain Drain: With the release of Street Fighter IV (blissful), everyone feels they need a proper arcade stick. I understand completely—I own every manner of Hori RAP, but it felt like high time to make my own. With the help of lizardlick.com and friendly folk from shoryuken.com, the deed was accomplished. Next month I'll discuss my adventures in stickmodding here in play with our own Eric Patterson.

Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV



Casey Loe
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I couldn't be happier that we've done away with review scores. It's ridiculous to believe that there's some objective standard of quality that covers the opinions of every person who plays games. That said, I will miss dishing out the 3.5s, because a good reaming just isn't the same without some arbitrarily low score at the end.

Brain Drain: RE5 is both a very good game and a tremendous disappointment. I had a blast with co-op, but RE has always been a great single-player series, and you simply can't build your game around co-op without sacrificing the depth and design of your single-player campaign. With all the money and time spent on this title, couldn't they have made a parallel campaign with the same assets, but more tuned for a single-player experience? This is great, but... It's not what I wanted from RE.

Game of the Month: RE5



Eric L. Patterson
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: I come from the angle that games can always be fixed and/or improved in some way, that games should be about making the player happy, not the developer, and if a game is multiplayer, it should be online, period. I'll forgive a game's flaws if it is an enjoyable experience, but I wish the small user-centered details weren't so often overlooked. **B**

Brain Drain: My Xbox 360 got the Red Rings of Death... again. Even new generation of gaming machines seems to bring more possible ways your consoles can croak. No wonder I'm glad to hear we'll be getting the DSi over here soon; it's the one piece of hardware I know will work every time I ask it to. Death Tank makes it to XBLA; now hurry up and get me KOF'98 UM!

Game of the Month: Avalon Code



Heather Campbell
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Modus Operandi: Games are a journey, and should be covered like travel journalism. It's more important to know how a game affects you than to provide a list of options it features on its menu screen. The number of guns, the types of vehicles, the variety of locations—these are bullet points for the back of the box. I'll tell you if it made me feel.

Brain Drain: If a theatrical script is called a stageplay, and a script for film is called a screenplay, then does that mean that a video-game script is called a Gameplay? Or is it a Consoleplay? What do you call a video-game script? Interactiveplay? Playplay? And when will these scripts get good enough to celebrate with awards? I want a video-game Oscar night. And not the one we have now.

Game of the Month: Street Fighter IV

Resident Evil

Safari killing

words Brady Fiechter

A friend of mine—name withheld to protect his identity—recently spotted my precious collection of Resident Evil games and decided now was a good time to give the original PlayStation debut a spin. There is a short list of games I consider unrivaled in their own unique ways, and Resident Evil stands tall and proud near the top. “You must experience this game,” I said. “Actually, I just did,” he replied, “and it’s a pile of manure. How could you possibly play a game that controls like this?”

Well, silly me, I embracingly did 13 years ago, and now you’ve got the same situation—a highly accomplished game that will draw in legions of established fans while irking the rest and newcomers alike who struggle to accept a control scheme that is as ruthlessly rigid as the PlayStation original.

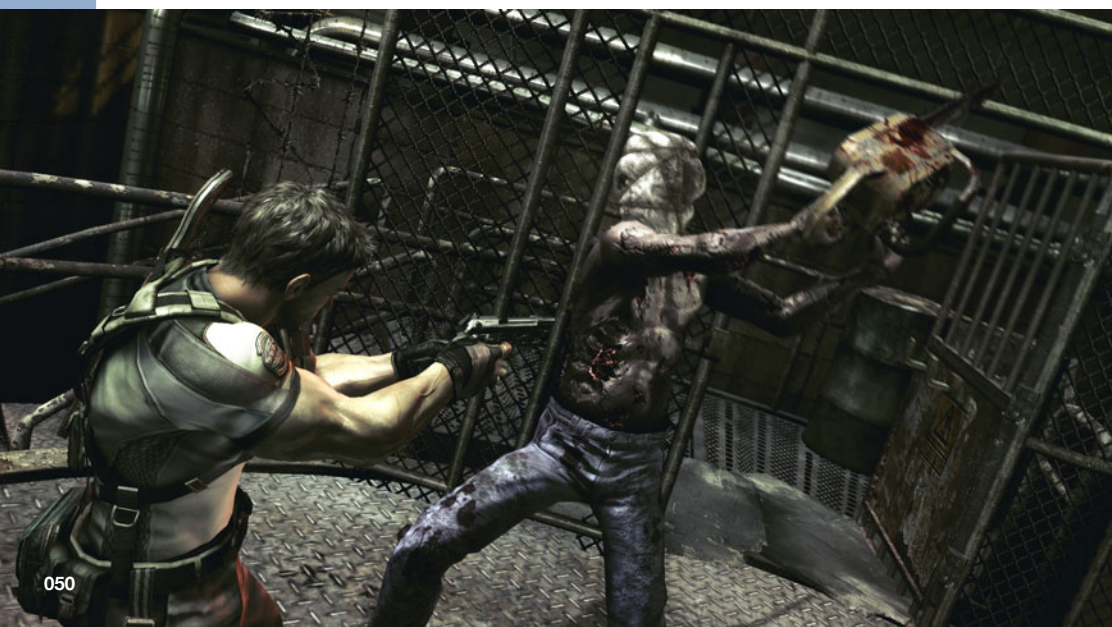
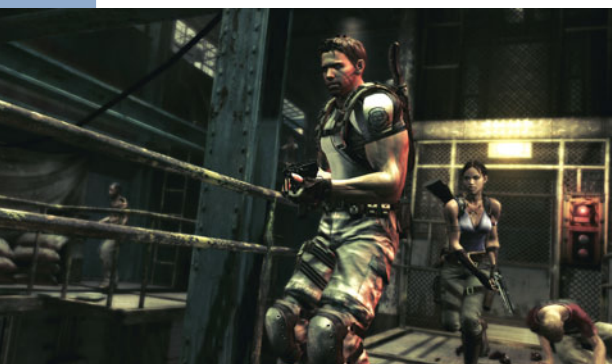
Resident Evil has always caught flack for its forklift character movement, yet the rebuttal from both developer and fan has been consistent: this defines the game, it

is part of the generator for tension, it is specific and practical within the design of the Resident Evil world. The problem we have here is that so much about gaming convention is evolving that what was accepted a few years ago might be scoffed at today by even the most forgiving fans. Resident Evil 5 basically feels identical to Resident Evil 4, strafe-free and methodical, but it just doesn’t work as well for a number of reasons. The enemy encounters are faster and more devious, the numbers onscreen have been dialed way up, and we’ve been introduced to better solutions to third-person action of this nature that render Resident Evil 5 a tad antiquated.

A game should not ask you to begrudgingly accept its control scheme, yet this is exactly what happens in Resident Evil 5. It never fully works, but it works well enough to keep the game on course as an exciting, engaging, terrifically satisfying chapter of Resident Evil.

Africa as a setting is at times beautiful and arresting, surprising with its moments of mystical allure. The adventure often moves underground, inspiring intriguing set pieces like a labyrinthine temple and other giant structures that create a mood more in line with what I want out of a Resident Evil experience. When the darkness is replaced by the light of a blazing sun, the change in tone and texture is a rich contrast that abundantly pleases. If I could have it my way, I’d prefer the creep and ornate intimacy of a mansion-like setting, but that’s not what Resident Evil 5 is about, and you must accept it on its own strengths—which are plenty.

This is an action game. There are almost too many enemy encounters and too many moments of high peril



Mad chainsaw guy demands the magnum.



to leave much to surprise and subtlety. The focus on hunkering down and shooting mass hordes of zombified creatures is more ingrained into the fabric of design than Resident Evil 4, inviting the co-op method of play over the single-player trek. The game is at its best with a friend, opening up more strategic paths into the disposal of the infected masses. When your partner in crime Sheva is handled by the AI, she actually does an acceptable job of managing her own items and helping out with the action. Her presence can be distracting, yes, but are partner characters ever really what you wish they would be? When a live friend takes the reigns, the intrinsic camaraderie takes over and makes the inclusion of another character worth it. You have to pay especial attention to item efficiency—ammo is in short supply if you aren't careful—and with some of the enemy hit-points dialed obnoxiously high, and your ass getting trapped in by the labored controls, careful partner play is an entertaining component that really sells the fun in Resident Evil 5. A little struggle actually provides a certain tension that is charged with the presence of your co-op lifeline.

That fun factor, that basic enjoyment of play, is the nebulous quality Resident Evil 5 embodies more than any game in the series. That could be an insult or compliment depending on your point of view. There is very little fear and poignant dread in this world, where coolly stylized, tentacle-flailing enemies serve as slick target practice more than surprising objects of horror. The script tries so hard to be a roaring action movie that you can't take a single word—or situation—seriously. There are a few plot tidbits worth saving for the real fans, but here again we have a cheap cracker-jack story that is little more than cinematography frames—which do look great.

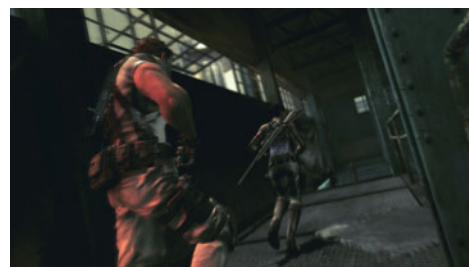
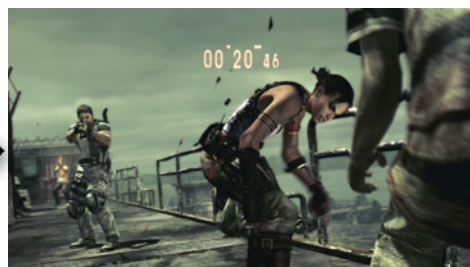
Approach Resident Evil 5 less as the sequel that is supposed to somehow live up to a masterwork in Resident Evil 4—no way is that impact of newness happening this time out—and more as the annoying but fantastic African safari of doom.

“The game is at its best with a friend, opening up more strategic paths into the disposal of the infected masses.”



parting shot

Get this out of your head right now: this is not Resident Evil 4. But it's a fine installment in a continuing move toward action and looming set pieces. Be prepared for that control scheme though...





MAD WORLD

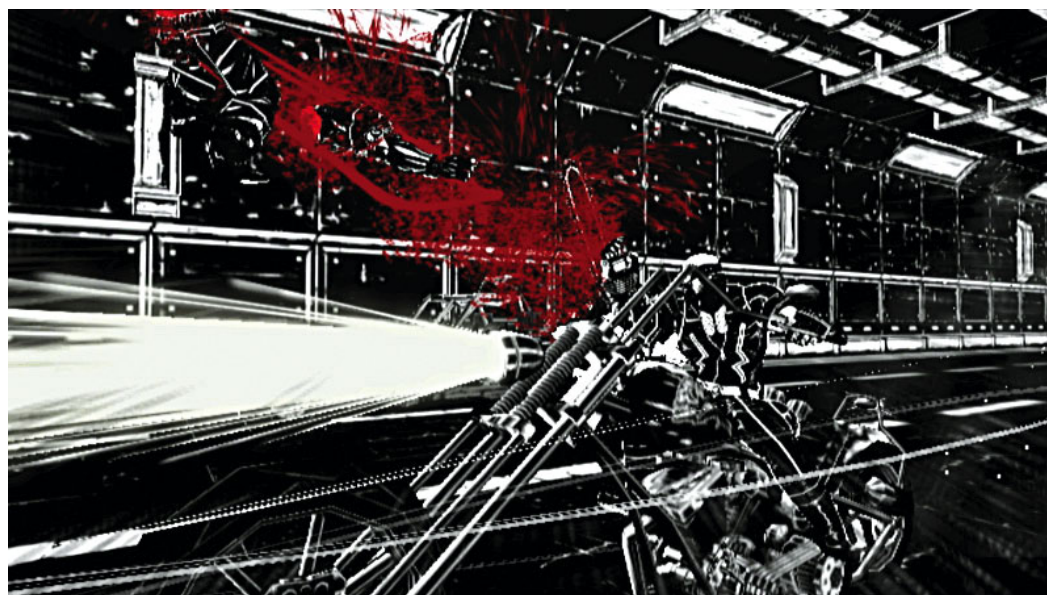
What's black and white and red all over?

words Dave Halverson

If you're 18 years or older, or go by the name McLovin, and like to play with your Wii, then by now you've either played MadWorld, thought about playing MadWorld, or are thoroughly disgusted by the mere existence of MadWorld on the system you bought to put a little zing in your workout or play pretend baseball with the family—only to discover that it's been tainted by more blood than all of the Mortal Kombats, Grand Theft Autos and Call of Dutys combined. Get ready for some Shock TV!

The funny thing about the whole Wii=fun-for-the-whole-family rub is that it pretty much begins and ends with Wii Fit and Wii Play and a few last hurrahs from those irksome character-driven action games Nintendo used to make that only appealed to a few million devotees who socked away allowances and birthday money (along with anything they could pinch from mom's purse) to buy first-party NES and SNES games until they got old enough to max-out their credit cards, blow the rent, forgo a social life and live on macaroni and cheese to feed their N64s and GameCubes anything bearing the sacred Nintendo seal. Otherwise, it's been pretty much business as usual for publishers looking for their piece of the Wii pie. Cost-effective ports got it done for a while, along with the occasional fresh IP, but for some reason the violence card has been a relatively safe play for Wii publishers since day one. Like burning satire out of the mouths of babes and talking Christmas poo, playing an M-Rated game on the Wii is so wrong that it feels just right.

Games have gotten a lot bloodier over the past few years, but mainly where realism is concerned. One need only peruse the halls of any M-Rated first-person ass whoopin' or recent Monolith game to see how effective a good exit wound splatter or blood trail can be,



but realism and the Wii don't really see eye to eye. Seems like the cartoon violence that put gaming on the map (with a little help from the Republican Party...okay, a lot) is where it's at for the Wii, and coincidentally I couldn't agree more. I'll take one MadWorld over a dozen leaky first-person shooters anytime, anywhere. What No More Heroes, Onechanbara, and House of the Dead Overdrive began for the modern-day over-the-top blood bath, MadWorld finishes with a big red exclamation mark, skewered through a body hanging on a spike on the side of a bus. Call me old-fashioned but there's something about a city completely cut off from civilization whose citizens have all been instructed to either pick





up a weapon and start killing or choke on the toxic air and die, all in the name of reality TV, that brings a tear to my eye. If games are indeed an escape, then MadWorld is Harry Houdini. Nothing could be more vile or foul mouthed. Just like the action, the commentary in MadWorld makes Celebrity Death Match look like Sesame Street. The f-bombs are as clean as it gets because that's just how raunchy MadWorld is in its own mega-violent, ultra stylish, over-the-top Japanese way. The designers at Platinum games must have been laughing hysterically from concept to gold-master coming up with all of Verrigan City's crazy death machines, Bloodbath Challenges and blindingly colorful characters. They had me at Asia Town's Spring Roller (Man Burger anyone?), but an Authentic Castle Courtyard from Austria, where I get to play "Man Golf" with zombie heads, while they're still attached? Pinch me already! And how about this point system? Superfluous be damned, MadWorld has mad technique too and there just might be something to this whole Nunchuk and

"Why just chainsaw somebody in half when you can jam a sign post through their skull, pop a barrel over their head, set 'em on fire..."

Wii-Remote thing. I don't even mind the prompts. The better the combo the more points, and the faster you meet each point challenge the more fun MadWorld becomes as new weapons and Bloodbath Challenges open up. Why just chainsaw somebody in half when you can jam a sign post through their skull, pop a barrel over their head, set 'em on fire, and pound their bloody carcass onto a massive spike over and over and over again?

Hurl human bottle rockets onto billboard sized nipple and (it rhymes with "for china") spikes; tear off heads, rip out still beating hearts, skewer, mash, grind-up, or deep-fry bodies...whatever gets the job done. It's all about killing your way to each mega nasty, pattern based, quick-time killin' boss battle (and these ones defy description) and saving the day. That's right; you're the good guy!

Why not make it a Manwhich night?

Even the story is good. Did you catch that whole ancient gladiator/Mesopotamia speech? "People are weeds. Only when they are cut will flowers bloom." Where were these writers when Arnold was doing The Running Man?

Complaints? Oh yeah. For all the whining some critics do over manual cameras, well, here's the alternative. Chase cameras that force you to constantly snap the camera behind your character really suck. Any non-rails 3D environment needs a manual camera. Dual analog control would make MadWorld a much more enjoyable game but sadly it's not compatible with the Classic controller or any of Nintendo's traditional pads. Accidental pauses are also inevitable if your hands are bigger than a 10-year-old's and the touchy lock-on could use a bit of tweaking too. Getting from burb to burb on Jack's chopper was like the ultimate version of Road Rash so I wish there were more of it, along with the vertical exploration—an unexpected gameplay nugget that should have been used more, contingent on a manual camera. And finally, although I'll admit that it is catchy, especially while you're saving the Geishas in Asia Town, I'm not convinced that hip-hop was the right choice for the soundtrack. If ever there was a call for speed metal, this was it. Hey, I know! How about a full-color Xbox 360/PS3 version Sega? MadWorld is the feel-good game of the 7th-generation. You gotta spread the love.



parting shot



Why smell the flowers when you can mulch the whole garden and use it as a graveyard? MadWorld is a vile, dirty, cruel, pornographic, immoral, disgusting video game that I love. It's the classic beat-'em-up evolved! I want it in color on my PS3 and Xbox 360 now! And with any luck Kotobukiya will immortalize the pimp's helper/killer in polystone. If you don't own a Wii now is the time.

Star Ocean The Last Hope

A Universe of Potential

words Heather Anne Campbell

Star Ocean: The Last Hope opens with the total annihilation of every major city on earth. Paris, New York, and Washington D.C. are uniformly cooked under the heat of nuclear war. Faced with the certain extinction of humanity, the President of the United States of America looks up from his desk in the Oval Office, and decides to declare a truce with his enemies.

Wait, what?

Why is the President still in the White House? How does it appear unscathed, when it's surrounded by fallout and debris? And where do the survivors get the resources to build the armada of space-ships they use to search the galaxy for another un-ruined Earth?

In many ways, the opening of the newest Star Ocean game provides a metaphor for the rest of the game. It's a grand vision sullied by logical fallacy, littered with nostalgic hold-overs, and just generally cluttered with nonsense. The game has obvious high production values, as evidenced by clean character work and shining mechanical design, but all of the hard work is leadened by the rituals of the genre, which at this point are not the result of a console's technical shortcomings, but rather the trappings of tradition.

What's worse, the game might have been bearable in its original language, but the hideously lengthy (and poorly directed) cutscenes are demoralizing in English. There is no reason not to offer a downloadable Japanese language voice pack on Live; let enthusiasts fill up their hard-drives with optional content, and give the English game to the rest.

Even the locomotion in Star Ocean is dispiriting, as the main character has two modes of movement: Walk or



"Even the locomotion in Star Ocean is dispiriting, as the main character has two modes of movement: Walk or run."

run. A limited dash is available, and players will undoubtedly find themselves skip-sprinting across continents like a rolling Link in Zelda 64.

All of these complaints get between the author of Star Ocean and the player. There's a good, maybe even a fun game tucked behind all of the scattered save points and aggravatingly large dungeons. Behind what seems like thirty hours of filler is ten hours of a sharp and entertaining game. The combat engine is rich and varied (and leveling up your character is personal, allowing for great variation between players), and the concept of the game glows. There's multiple modes of play for an OCD RPG

fan who has completed the game once or twice, and the overall presentation shimmers.

There are no random battles (which at this point is necessary in these games), there's a deep set of side-quests and fetch missions, and an almost MMO attention to detail in Star Ocean's crafting, cooking, smithing, and harvesting system. RPG fans will love Star Ocean until Final Fantasy XIII comes out. But gamers who have grown up with RPGs, expecting them to mature with us, will be frustrated by the game's stagnancy and direction.

To wit: on a Space Ship travelling the universe, the second in command, a female co-pilot, has a major, deprecating inferiority complex. How did she get past the military psych evaluation to get her job? The answer is, regrettably, "Because all of the girls in JRPGs have emotional shortcomings."

But is that really where we want to leave JRPGs? Fixed in their unsurprising habits, as opposed to breaking new ground for the good of the game? Star Ocean: The Last Hope offers another jog down the path of the genre, which may satisfy diehard fans. But ask yourself: how many times are you going to pay to see the same movie? Especially when the story is so poorly delivered?

parting shot

Star Ocean is a museum of JRPG artifacts, which get in the way of the tour we want to take through the galaxy. Diehard fans of the genre will embrace it, but spending so much money on satisfying enthusiasts alone seems a waste.





Wanted: Weapons of Fate

Bending bullets

words Casey Loe



When you see the word "cinematic" on the back of a box, it's a pretty good sign that the game is going to suck. Fancy camera angles and carefully scripted stunts may make for a visually compelling film, but you can't shoehorn gameplay into predetermined outcomes and still have it be fun. It's no surprise that Wanted: Weapons of Fate fell into this trap, since it's based on such a stylishly directed movie. But it is a surprise that the developers at Grin would focus so single-mindedly on making their game look cool, and fail to accomplish even that.

Wanted's third-person action segments borrow heavily from Gears of War, with essentially the same cover system but even more of a focus on maintaining cover. When played correctly, you're almost never moving freely, just sliding and diving from one bit of cover to the next throughout the entire level. While this does look pretty cool, it's a total cheat from a game design perspective, since it forces you into a single path, freeing the developers from having to come up with any real enemy AI or alternate paths for the player. It's astonishing how little freedom has been programmed into Wanted: Weapons of Fate—you don't even get to choose your weapons. You play almost the entire game with the default handguns, and the few exceptions are parts where you step through a doorway and find yourself suddenly looking through the scope of a sniper rifle or the crosshair of a mounted turret. And then you have no choice but to use those weapons; you're superglued to the floor until the game has decided you've completed that section. Lest you tire of the nearly scripted Gears-style gameplay, the game throws in a bit of variety with *completely* scripted sequences, which are like QTEs except instead of button presses you have a targeting reticule and have to hit a series of targets to succeed.

And so by alternating between scripted sequences in which you have no freedom, and third-person action sequences in which you have only the *illusion* of freedom, Wanted leads players by the nose through its nine short missions.

Wanted is not entirely without good ideas. Instead of slavishly following the plot of the movie, as so many licensed games do, Weapons of Fate unfolds in a mix of prequel levels (featuring the hero's father), and sequel levels (featuring protagonist Wesley), which are set only a few hours after the end of the movie. (There's a huge continuity error there, as the movie's final scene seemingly takes place weeks after the destruction of the Loom, while the game takes place the next day. But whatever.) This is an interesting way to approach a movie-based game, although it still doesn't result in a compelling story. As much as I enjoyed the movie Wanted, a rich mythology was not one of its strengths.

The other cool thing in Weapons of Fate is the implementation of the special abilities possessed by Wesley and his father. Curving bullets has a similar effect to the aftertouch employed in games like Heavenly Sword and Dark Sector, but the system of selecting your arc before firing makes it much less disruptive to use in combat. Other abilities like enhanced movement are similar to the bullet time of countless other games, but have unique twists (in this case, being restricted to the brief windows when you're moving between cover) and are generally fun to use.

The great irony of Wanted: Weapons of Fate is that while the developers have focused on visually striking

"The other cool thing in Weapons of Fate is the implementation of the special abilities possessed by Wesley and his father."

graphics over open-ended gameplay, the game actually looks terrible. The frame rate is inconsistent, there's screen tearing everywhere, and the environments are bland and repetitive. When a movie-licensed game comes out nine months after the movie, it's often a sign that the game was held back to make for a higher-quality product. But that certainly wasn't the case here—this game has all the technical issues and choppy transitions you would expect from a game rushed out to make a simultaneous movie release, and it's *still* nine months late.

parting shot



Wanted is like Gears of War, but without multiplayer modes, weapons, good graphics, open-ended gameplay, and more than a few hours of content. All that's left is lots of F-bombs and a completely forgettable story.

SONIC

AND THE BLACK KNIGHT

A Knight to remember

words Dave Halverson

Sonic the Hedgehog did not go quietly into the 3D night. It would be a gargantuan effort spanning four years, three continents, two console generations, and one calamitous casualty. When Sega Technical Institute finally pulled the plug on Sonic X-treme in 1996 after a two-year development debacle so exhausting the lead designer landed in the hospital, the first 3D Sonic died hard, and took the Sega Saturn down with it. Call it payback for Sonic Spinball.

Sega's been poking and prodding poor little Sonic ever since, shoehorning him into a racing spin-off, fighting games, hover-board racing, a board game, an action/RPG—they even turned him into stretchy armed werehog...and now he's a knight. Sonic's got a sword; Sonic Guitar Jam can't be far behind.

Seems like Sega will do just about anything to recapture the magic and popularity of the legendary 2D Sonic in a 3D world, except the only thing they ever had to, or should—make it 2D...all 2D. But they won't. And honestly, at this point, I don't know if I'd even care. This is too much fun. Sonic's become like some grand experiment—Sonic Teams' private Frankenstein—and we their little Igors. Any remaining Sonic fan will tell you horror stories about soft collision, hyper-sensitive control, and more bugs than Oogie Boogie's crotch, but they'd probably rather talk about the good times. Show me a

Sonic fan who looks beyond each game's inherent quirks and I'll show you a happy guinea pig.

The problem is all the core fans they've shed along the way. Sega of America insists that Sonic's fans are still sticking their teeth under their pillows, and as a result they're fishing in an empty lake. Unleashed was aimed directly at a broad "youth" demographic and it literally tanked. Kids don't know Sonic and they don't want to. It's too hard and it's just not "cool." That's because Sonic Team has been making these games for the fans all along. For as long as I've been loyal to Sega it's been the same story: SoJ and the fans versus a SoA that changes so often they don't know who they are. So they chase trends and demographics trying to shove specialized games into their respective target demos, shedding fans along the way. It's hard to watch. But hey, Sonic Team still hasn't received SoA's memo about Sonic being a Webkin and they finally remembered where they put the other half of their Wii controller!

But hang on just a minute. People are barely finished flogging the Werehog (those levels did get tedious towards the end) and Sonic's back...with a sword? When did this happen? Could this be the Wii game they were making in place of Unleashed before they decided to edit the Wii version into existence? It must be. Ironical that it's the closest Sonic Team has come to emulating vintage Sonic in 3D yet. All the usual haters will trounce it hardily, and hardly play it, but if you're a Sonic survivor, Black

I'm gonna go with the glowing horns...



Sonic's doing a little Soul Surging...



“Aside from moving Sonic forward down a set path, nearly every other aspect of the gameplay has seen some level of revision.”



Knight's soothing ointment is just the thing for the Wiihog that ailes you.

Unlike the clumsy Sonic and the Secret Rings, Black Knight relies on a healthy dose of level objectives over gimmicky control, obstacle courses and ring collection. That's right, no rings! There are no visible rings in Black Knight. Rings still equal health but they only exist within chests, vases and yellow vapor.

In fact, Game director Tetsu Katano has scrapped most of Sonic's Trademark (3D) gameplay. Aside from moving Sonic forward down a set path, nearly every other aspect of the gameplay has seen some level of revision. For one, Sonic doesn't turn around. He can walk or leap backwards, but no u-turns. Not like in Secret Rings where he backed up like a semi truck while you sat their tilting your Wii Remote like a noob; back flips are an effective tactic now against charging knights or to forage for rings. By tethering Sonic to three lanes and eliminating ring

collection Katano has done away with Sonic's buggiest bits, at the expense of freedom and speed—two things I don't think Sonic ever needed. The original game was start and stop. It didn't shoot Sonic through the levels at breakneck speeds. Remember the Marble Zone? There were speed sections.

Black Knight moves like old Sonic, minus the loops. There are no talky towns either. They call Black Knight the second installment in the storybook series but it looks and feels nothing like Secret Rings and it certainly has nothing in common with any 3D Sonic. Nothing's broken. It's just straight ahead rails Sonic with a combat system, RPG elements, mission objectives, a story that's actually not fruity, online Battle Modes out the whazoo, and an enormous stash of bonus content to amass. C'mon kids!

On foot Sonic gathers momentum slowly and rarely runs at full speed, utilizing a fixed 3-lane strafe to avoid or smash the obstacles and enemies in his path. Sword play is rampant in Black Knight, and although haphazardly tethered too obligatory Wii-Remote wagging (no specific angling required) flailing Sonic's arrogant talking sword Caliburn is surprisingly enjoyable. It seems a little imprecise almost by design at first, most likely to convey a sense of weight relative with the lumbering nature of the metallic adversaries and low-speed assaults, but also because Sonic begins the game as what Caliburn refers to as a Knave—i.e., scamp, rascal, rogue, scoundrel... But not for long. Sonic levels-

YOU'D RUN TOO... A brief history of Sonic's chaotic run on console-3D

Sonic in 3D Timeline



A :: R.I.P. Sonic X-treme

Sega Saturn (1995-1996)

Sonic dodges the first 3D bullet and takes the Saturn (and nearly the game's designer) down with him. Having played the game in both its fish-eye and rolling tube form it's for the better. Anyone remember Astal? And Sega wanted a 3D Sonic? The writing is on the wall...



B :: Sonic R

Sega Saturn (1997), PC (1998)

The first 3D Sonic; Sega of Japan's baby—the game that propelled Sega past Nintendo—ends up a traditional lap-based racer from jolly old England, with creator Yuji Naka listed as General Producer.

C :: Sonic Adventure

Dreamcast (1999)

Visually arresting high-speed 3D meets multiplayer mash-up, shiny liquid FX, and fishing! Crude pedestrian models and the worst hub ever don't even register. The love is deep and all is forgiven. Dreamcast is go! And my hatred for Chaos begins.

D :: Sonic Adventure 2

Dreamcast (2001), GameCube (2002)

(First Sonic on a Nintendo system...booo)

Sonic Team ditch the gang save for Tails, introduce

Shadow and Rouge in parallel "Dark" Storylines and still manage to kick in 2-player co-op. My hatred for Chaos extends to snowboarding hedgehogs.

E :: Sonic Heroes

GameCube, Xbox, PS2 (2004)

The first multi-console Sonic introduces four 3-character switch-on-the-fly teams, based on a speed, flight, and power system in concert with the level design. Heroes' is Sonic Team's tightest playing 3D game to date and the team aspect, which reunites fans with Chaotix, adds boundless replay value. Here comes the fly...splat! The Xbox and GameCube versions look a generation above the PS2's.

F :: Shadow the Hedgehog

2005 GameCube, Xbox, PS2 (2005)

The console series returns to America and Sega Studio USA promptly delivers an inferior, heavy handed piece of scrap. A great character and possible branching series is crushed.

G :: Sonic Riders

GameCube, Xbox, PS2 (2006)

Sonic Team makes a racing game: World finds out Sonic Team doesn't know how to make racing games.

H :: Sonic the Hedgehog

Xbox 360 (2006)

To celebrate Sonic's 15th Anniversary Sonic Team give it all they've got and create a legendary Sonic game packed with diversity, stunning environments, and a new character that rivals, if not beats, Sonic himself—the telekinetic Silver the Hedgehog. But, true to form they ship it rough around the edges with frequent load times giving a waiting-to-pounce-press springy shoes. A great game gets unfairly slaughtered. The PS3 version that follows, expected to be better for obvious reasons, is completely broken.

I :: Sonic and the Secret Rings

Wii (2007)

Sonic Team's obligatory Wii-tilter is a clunky, albeit visually impressive, ring collector but introduces myriad of promising features.

J :: Sonic Riders: Zero Gravity

PS2, Wii (2008)

If at first you don't succeed, make another wobbly racing game?

K :: Sonic Unleashed

Xbox 360, PS3, Wii (2008)

Sonic Team Strikes Back: Sega Superstars Director Yoshihisa Hashimoto is handed the reins along with the company's brand new 3-years in the making super-high performance "Hedgehog Engine" and tasked with remaking Sonic. The pitch sounded like sweet music—a 50/50 side-scrolling to 3D ratio with a monster twist—but nobody liked the monster (too slow) and they forgot to mention the towns. Unleashed is beautiful but it's too mixed a bag for anyone other than die-hard Sonic fans. The 3D is difficult at times and downright unruly in a few areas but breathtaking otherwise, and the side scrolling is mostly too-fast and too fleeting. There's only one thing left to do... Hit Rewind!

Note to Sonic Team: Trix are for kids, Sonic is for Sonic fans. Banjo tried the kid thing, and the game is tuned to perfection and 100s of hours long...it wasn't pretty. Know where your fans are? Right here, waiting for you to do what you do best. Make us next-generation side-scrolling Sonic. ...A little Marble, Star Light, Emerald, add a little Aqua, a bunch of CD, a pinch of Chaotix and some Chemical as a preservative.



A good time to block.



up action RPG style, using ID points to identify items in the Item Codex which you can equip or use in Battle mode; and changing "Knight Style" as he gains followers, which directly correlates to level design, mission ops, and your performance.

The trick early on is preempting the medieval onslaught of clanking armored drones as you time your blocks, land your blows and thrash any airborne enemies. The coolest move comes by way of collecting the spirit energy that belches out of Arthur's hollow legions to unleash Sonic's Soul Surge—lightning fast sword strikes that can be chained until the gauge runs dry, or produce devastating one-hit kills. Soul Surging is also a great way to reach higher branches of the vertically forked paths later in the game. There's a direct correlation between the moves in Secret Rings and Black Knight, everything just seems to work better with Nunchuk. The gameplay from level to level is wonderfully

varied. Aside from the tangible gearworks—and there are clever apparatus galore—each fantasy land is filled with challenges such as rampages, rescues, and plot devices.

The only call for precise Wii-Remotions (my word, by the way, for Wii remote motions) comes fighting the Knights of the Round Table, but only if you choose to master their patterns. Simply applying pressure and shaking vigorously produces the same results. King Arthur requires some minor timing (the second time you engage him) but on the whole Sonic Team uses the games thespians to drive the story more so than the action. And therein lies the rub.

It all begins via typically gorgeous CGI when Sonic is summoned to the storybook world (armed with dual chili dogs) by Merlina the Wizard who beseeches him to defend the kingdom against King Arthur whose absolute power has gotten the best of him and corrupted him (absolutely). He's an invincible force as long as he

brandishes the Scabbard of Excalibur, so their only hope resides within Caliburn (the sword in the stone), which Sonic hastily yanks free before setting out to find the Lady of the Lake to ascertain Arthur's weakness, played by Amy. Sonic must also best Arthur's Knights of the Round Table—Sir Lancelot, Gawain, and Sir Percival, played by Shadow, Knuckles, and Blaze respectively. Sonic's real-world posse embodies characters of lore including Tails as a helpful Blacksmith and your friendly one-stop item and status shop.

Best for last: you'll cry "too short!" as the credits roll, but far from it. Playing as armored versions of Knuckles, Shadow, Blaze, and perhaps Silver (not sure yet), as new areas open up conducive to their unique styles and you apply earned items and create weapons using all that you have uncovered, Sonic and the Black Knight pays homage to the Sonic faithful in droves. I just pray there are enough of us left to appreciate yet another Sonic Team original.

He's Gawain crazy!...



"Nothing's broken. It's just straight ahead rails Sonic with a combat system, RPG elements, mission objectives..."

parting shot



The Wii has never looked so good. Black Knight is a gorgeous game filled with diversity, ingenuity and good old Sonic Team twitch gameplay combined with an absurd amount of user defined RPG elements, branching, playable characters, and a great story, with a twist, well told. Sonic will not go quietly into the kiddy coffin Sega has built for him either.



Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection

Sega's latest nefarious attempt to devalue my mint-in-the-box copy of E-SWAT

words Casey Lee

Sega has never been shy about cashing in on their back catalog of 8- and 16-bit classics. This is their fourth compilation in as many years, and while I'm not entirely thrilled about laying down another \$30 for games that should have been in the PlayStation 2's Sega Genesis Collection, Sega has once again left me with no choice. In addition to almost all of the games from that release, this compilation sports around 15 titles that have never been emulated before. Key additions include the first *Phantasy Star*, the first two *Shining Force* games, the *Streets of Rage* series, a handful of rare Master System games and the original arcade versions of a few Sega classics. There isn't any online play, but the emulation of the titles is flawless, and you can stretch out the games to a widescreen display or turn on a smoothing filter when you tire of being stabbed in the eye with jagged pixels.

Ironically, considering the title, the most disappointing omissions involve the Sonic series. The numbered Sonic the Hedgehog games are here, as is *Sonic & Knuckles*, but you can't snap the games together (as you can with the actual cartridges) to unlock the Knuckles-centric features built into *Sonic 2* and *3*. The lack of *Sonic CD* is another disappointment, although I guess Sega CD games fall outside of the scope of the collection.

"Ultimate Genesis RPG Collection" wouldn't have made for as marketable a title, but it would have been a far better description. For the first time in the west, the entire *Phantasy Star* series is together on one disc (although annoyingly, you have to unlock *Phantasy Star 1* by playing a 2-player game of *Sonic 2*). *Sword of Vermilion* from the last collection is gone (it sucked anyway), but in its place you'll find a half dozen newly emulated RPGs. You'll get both *Shining Force* games—true classics that still play well today—and *Shining in the Darkness*, an old-school gem of a first-person RPG. The unsung masterpiece *Beyond Oasis* may be

the best new game in the collection; thanks to its emphasis on strong gameplay and smooth hand-drawn animation, it has aged astonishingly well. The same can't be true of *Golden Axe Warrior*, which looks and feels rough, but is a great little *Zelda* clone that very few people are familiar with. The final new RPG in the batch is *Fatal Labyrinth*, Sega's attempt at a random dungeon game to rival the *Mystery Dungeon* series. That one didn't turn out so well, but it makes for an interesting historical artifact.

"Ultimate '80s-style Beat-'em-up Collection" would have worked too, since this collection brings us the three volumes of the excellent *Streets of Rage* series, the entire progressively declining *Golden Axe* series, and a few laughable blasts from the past, like *E-SWAT* and *Alien Syndrome* (which my mom made me return unopened because it looked too violent—remind me to thank her).

As always, there are plenty of troubling omissions. Where's *Revenge of Shinobi* and *Shadow Dancer*? Why tease us with the unlockable arcade version of *Altered Beast* when there are so many truly great games running on the same hardware that could have been on this collection? (The *Sega Ultimate Arcade Collection* better be coming next, damn it!) But of course, it isn't fair to review a compilation based on what it omits. The question is, are there enough games you'd be willing to pay \$5 for on WiiWare/XBLA/PSN to justify buying a \$30 collection? If you're any sort of game fan at all, the answer is yes.

parting shot

Sonic's Ultimate Genesis Collection has the perfect mixture of true classics and pleasantly laughable "man I can't believe I paid \$50 for that back in the day" nostalgia trips. Even if you already own one of Sega's previous compilations, there's enough new stuff here to make it worth your \$30.



"Ultimate Genesis RPG Collection" wouldn't have made for as marketable a title, but it would have been a far better description."



FINAL FANTASY CRYSTAL CHRONICLES: ECHOES OF TIME

LEAPING FROM THE DS TO THE WII, INTACT!

words Heather Anne Campbell

Staring at my HDTV, you'd think it was 1996 again. Chunky, bright landscapes rendered in low poly counts beam out over my living room sofa. Simple characters leap around the screen with triangles for feet, dodecahedrons for heads. The in-game camera refuses to rotate, and the whole thing is presented in a stubborn 4:3 aspect ratio.

I'm playing Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles: Echoes of Time on the Wii. It looks two generations worse than the original Crystal Chronicles for the Gamecube. That's because this game was developed for the DS, and is being presented on my 46" screen with nearly unaltered hand-held graphics. It's easily Square's most innovative, interesting choice since *The World Ends With You*; in the time since TWEWY's release, every game with the SE logo has been some kind of remake.

And in a way, this game is a remake. I'm playing the Wii remake of a DS game.

But Crystal Chronicles has always been about the community. So, for Square's multiplayer action RPG, SE made sure that no matter where you are, or what system you had, you could get a group together online and go out monster bashing.

Regrettably, an online match is hard to come by when you're playing the game in a review vacuum. Worse, it seems Square hasn't cleared up the netcode to reduce the latency that soured the Japanese release. We're deep into the world of online matchmaking; 2009 doesn't have time to wait for lag. Unfortunately, online matches in Echoes of Time sometimes suffer from ... Echoes ... in ... Time.

(Sorry.)

If you play the game as a solo affair, you're actually in for a charming ride. The difficulty is a little high, but that's always been the case in single-player CC games. The music is sweet and singable, and the character designs are the same eclectic mix from Crystal Chronicles' previous.

Flat out, if I'm going to make a recommendation, I'd say buy the DS version. There's something off about

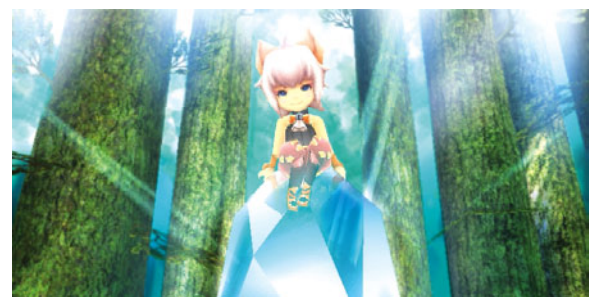
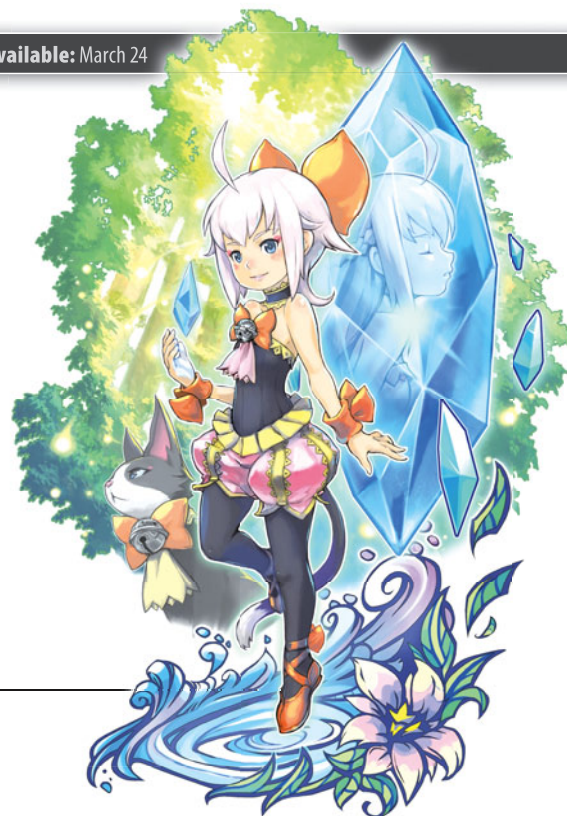
"Unfortunately, online matches in Echoes of Time sometimes suffer from ... Echoes ... in ... Time."

Can anyone hear me out there?



the control scheme on the Wii; every button is mapped to its instinctive opposite. A GameCube or Classic Controller alleviates this a little bit, but when you combine the controller with the strangeness of playing DS graphics on a big screen ... well, you might as well just purchase the game in its original form. I can't imagine a Wii owner who doesn't have a DS, unless they're residing in the Hollywood Hills and they bought the console exclusively for WiiFit.

In terms of the game's quest and mission modes, I have to say I'm not a big fan of selectable quests; I like



the linear feel of larger RPGs, as opposed to the pick-and-choose adventures of Echoes of Time. Though there is a larger story to investigate, the whole package feels largely episodic. I believe this scales down the stakes of the plot, and reduces the momentum of the story ... but it's an understandable choice when it comes to the online, match-making focus of Echoes.

parting shot

Action RPGs all seem to be aiming at the Holy Grail of a four-player *Zelda*, without realizing there's already lots to learn from *Four Swords*. Still, for the right demographic, this game is a pleasant romp, and the music alone provides something for the older set.



Halo Wars

Building a Better Spartan

words Matt Cabral

In the early '80s, when other gaming geeks were starting world war three with their Commodore 64s (wait, that might've been the movie *War Games*) I was gleefully storming Gargamel's castle in the totally awesome Colecovision Smurf game. My preference for gamepads over keyboards continued through each generation, and to this very day I'll argue that an FPS plays better on a console than a PC; I mean, c'mon, isn't it obvious, gamepads have triggers just like guns. What I'm getting at is this: My passion for non-PC gaming makes me both the best and worst person to review a console real-time strategy title; on the one hand I'm exactly the type of trigger-happy gamer Microsoft's trying to convert with Halo Wars, a built-for-consoles RTS set in the rich sci-fi universe Master Chief calls home. But at the same time, how the hell does a console junkie know what makes an RTS tick?

"Halo Wars needed to prove itself beyond its shiny green armor exterior. And it absolutely did."

Well, here goes...

While I'm a fan of the franchise's first-person shooters, I'm not a fanboy—I only played through the first three games once, I thought the third and second entries were over-rated, and I think ODS1 is a dumb name. Because I'm not automatically sold by any game with a Warthog speeding through it, Halo Wars needed to prove itself beyond its shiny green armor exterior. And it absolutely did. While its Halo-fied presentation, complete with stunning cutscenes, preyed on my weakness for pretty sci-fi productions, it was the streamlined gameplay and simplified controls that had me marching back to the frontline. Halo Wars makes selecting units, building bases, applying upgrades, and moving around the map an organic, never frustrating experience. Making selections from easy-to-decipher on-screen flywheels, rather than fumbling through text-laden menus, is effortless and intuitive, allowing newcomers to the genre feel like old pros. The RTS has long struggled with getting console controls right, but Halo Wars has nailed it, allowing players to enjoy the visual payoff of their actions rather than wondering what the hell you just did.

And this is especially important here, because there are so many sights to absorb; the beloved universe is shrunk down in a way that made me feel like I was playing with cool



little Halo action figures. From the intricately detailed UNSC soldiers, to the series' staple vehicles—your heart will beam with pride the first time a tiny Warthog rumbles out of your production facility—Halo fans get an eyeful. The sound is equally impressive; I was totally expecting to hear that booming Halo score, but smaller touches, like the spot-on cackling of a Grunt or the screen-clearing blast of a Scorpion tank made this an authentic extension of the franchise.

There's no question the accessible controls, addictive gameplay, and attention to detail in bringing this beloved universe to a new genre will win over fans of the franchise and unseasoned strategists alike. And while the mouse-and-keyboard jockeys who've been perfecting their combat strategies and resource management

skills for years will no doubt find fault and even a lack of depth when comparing this console-friendly entry to the brain-taxing titles they're used to, they'd be hard-pressed not to appreciate the level of polish and care that's gone into this title. Halo Wars was clearly a passion project for the now defunct Ensemble Studios, and I can't imagine them going out on a higher note.

parting shot

While longtime PC strategists might find it a bit watered down for their tastes, Halo Wars triumphs in bringing the tricky genre to consoles. In addition to breaking bold new gameplay ground on the Xbox 360, it absolutely drips with fan-pleasing Halo details. Halo Wars has done for console RTS what the original Halo did for console FPS.

System: PS3, Xbox 360, PC | Dev: Ubisoft | Pub: Ubisoft | Online: PvP, Co-Op | ESRB: T | Available: March 3

Tom Clancy's H.A.W.X.

Tray tables up, seats in the upright position...

From stealth-action and squad-based combat, to voice-activated strategy and casino-crashing ops, Tom Clancy has slapped his moniker on a variety of genres—can “Cooking with Clancy” be far off? But to his credit and, more specifically, to that of the development teams crafting his realistic near-future interactive military operations, his name on the box usually guarantees a good time. And now we can add Tom Clancy's H.A.W.X, an air combat sim set in a universe Sam Fisher and the Rainbow Six boys would be right at home in, to the list of successes.

H.A.W.X. strikes an appealing balance between arcade seat-of-your-pants fun, and more strategy-focused realism. This is possible primarily because of the title's toggleable auto-assist mechanic; dubbed the Enhanced Reality System, it serves as a sort of ass-saving co-pilot, providing everything from enemy detection and damage buffers, to aircraft control and targeting help. In short, it ensures you'll rarely need to worry about becoming a grounded pile of black smoke-spewing twisted metal.

Once you acclimate to the controls—which does take some dedication—you can turn this system off, and brave the unfriendly skies without assistance. Initially, this can lead to some frustration; it had me feeling like a puppet whose strings had been snipped.

But soon you'll appreciate the without-a-net gameplay, and the amazing adrenaline-spiking thrills it provides. With flight skills honed, you'll acquire a better handle on the combat as well, which, by the way, will also set your ticker racing, especially when you're dividing attacks between ground-based and skyward targets.

The solid play mechanics are nicely complemented by some eye-searing visuals; cruising by real-world landmarks such as Rio de Janeiro's Christ the Redeemer statue and the Washington Monument at mach speed definitely deals some breath-stealing moments. The satisfying solo campaign also serves as the perfect primer to online competitive modes and an addictive 4-player co-op experience. H.A.W.X. probably won't recruit an audience that isn't already intrigued by this genre, but for those who are—and maybe need a break from Ace Combat—it packs one hell of a high altitude punch. **Matt Cabral**

parting shot

A nice addition to an under-represented genre, buoyed by tight controls, thrilling flying, and intense combat. At this point, I'd probably follow Clancy down any genre path; Tom Clancy's Petz... anyone, anyone?

System: PS3, Xbox 360 | Dev: Vicious Cycle | Pub: D3 | Online: NA | ESRB: T | Available: March 3, 2009

Eat Lead: The Return of Matt Hazard

Great Script, Bad Director

Sometime during my play-through of Eat Lead, I stopped seeing the action as a video-game, and began to see it as a complicated menu I had to navigate in order to unlock the clever script. The game-play itself is so lethargic that playing it for fun just doesn't work; the engine and mechanics aren't fresh enough to be celebrated. The action is pretty much duck, cover, shoot, reload, rinse, repeat—but without any of the snap of, say, Gears or Uncharted.

But the game has value. Plenty of it. It's a game about games, and revels in its weirdness. It's the comeback launch for a hero that never existed, the rebirth of a protagonist that's actually ... just being born for the first time. Our burnt-out 80's video-game hero, Matt Hazard,

has just landed his next-gen debut, and he begins the game as a detective in Chinatown—like something out of Stranglehold. In Matt's world, game characters are like cartoons in Who Framed Roger Rabbit; they're actors that retain their identities from game to game. But because his nemesis is trying to kill off Matt's I.P. itself by manipulating the game he's coded into, our three-dimensional hero eventually finds himself fighting two-dimensional bad guys, as well as Japanese RPG characters. When a menu appears on-screen, Matt can see it. When a quick-time event asks us to press B, Matt taps the onscreen button with us, as it exists in his space.

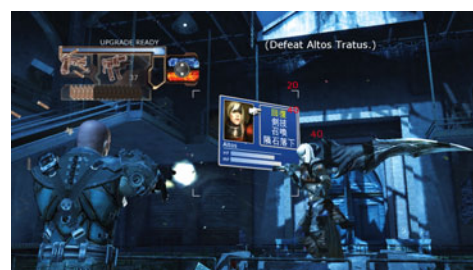
It's a shame that the game is just so clumpy, because a fast-paced, crunchy shooter would have meant real success for Hazard. Instead, we get a cult classic, memorable for its concept instead of its execution.

Heather Anne Campbell



parting shot

I laughed out loud. Not like I did at Portal, but in the embarrassed way I sometimes laugh at barrels full of ammo. Still, the game made me laugh. Hazard's real legacy may be in its classification; it's an action game, but must be considered a comedy. Imagine a future where the genre of a game is not based on its weaponry, but rather on its content.



System: DS Developer: Konami Publisher: Konami ESRB: E10+ Online: Wireless Exchange Available: March 14

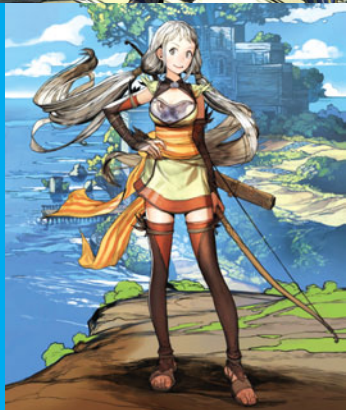
review



Suikoden Tierkreis

Tiers of Joy.

words Heather Anne Campbell



They look pretty...until they open their mouths.

Is the future of JRPGs the auto-battle? If developers are convinced that these games need pace-crushing turn-based battles, perhaps this is the inevitable outcome: level your characters to respectable strengths and let the game play itself. The genre is boiled down to simple exploration ... and maybe that's what we've always loved about JRPGs anyway—the locales, the environments, the characters, and the sweeping, heroic overlooks where we can contemplate destiny.

I've been playing Suikoden games since PlayStation One, when I had the console sitting on top of a milk-crate in my room, the S-video output secured in the back of my GXTV. I worked at a video-game store, and used my hard-earned minimum wages to secure my copy of the game the day it came out. I replaced the American cover with a printout of the Japanese instruction booklet, and enjoyed every minute of the classic RPG. Suikoden got it early on—these games are about broad heroics and a colorful cast of collectable characters. Beyond that, these games are about great music.

I'm happy to say that more than a decade later, Suikoden: Tierkreis has retained the soul of the first (and subsequent) games. The music is hopeful, the skies blue, and the plucky heroics unembarrassed and brash. There are 108 heroes to discover, a castle to build and occupy, and a world of sweet melodies and grassy plains.

It's not the first time I've played Suikoden on a handheld, but this new game feels like a reinvention, a re-introduction. It's not *quite* Suikoden, but more like a Suikoden-inspired game, one that takes the themes of previous titles and drops them into a new, multiverse-hopping story. I could do without the clipped voice acting, but at least the game's cutscenes can be flipped through at your own pace. What this means is, unlike our hi-def consoles' insistence on delivering dumb monologues lethargically, we can click through the simple story of Suikoden as fast as we can read it. A silly

"Suikoden: Tierkreis has retained the soul of the first (and subsequent) games."

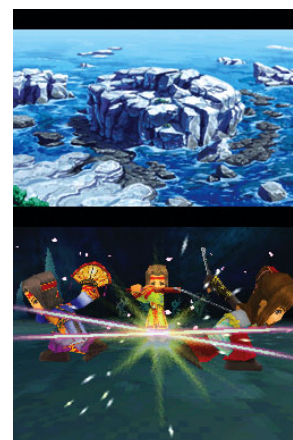
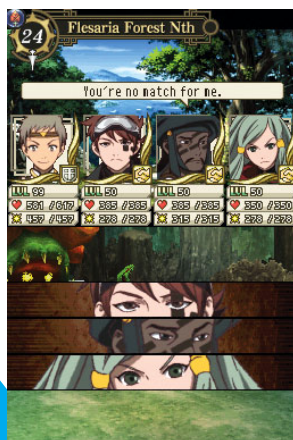
story doesn't seem so heavy when you can read it quick. The main character may be grating, but you can usually cut him off mid-sentence, which I greatly appreciate.

And though the game seems geared towards a younger audience, there's nothing here that's insulting to a teenage (or older) player. The difference between a young game, and one that talks down to its player, is obvious. There's nothing overly violent or sexual about Tierkreis, but there's nothing upsettingly saccharin, either.

Before I go, I do have a major qualm with the armor system. Visiting shops and purchasing equipment happens in every RPG, but often developers will allow you to preview status changes to your character before you drop your fantasy money on an item. Not so with Tierkreis. I'm typically a stat-junkie when it comes to these games, but I found myself winging it more often in Suikoden DS, simply because I didn't want to sell back armor I'd discovered wasn't quite what a specific character needed. It's a tad bit unforgivable, and more than a little annoying every time you have to head out to get gear.

parting shot

A fantastic re-introduction to the charms of Suikoden, marred by crap voice acting ... that is happily skippable. Gorgeous, high-skied adventures await!



preview

System: DS Developer: Climax Entertainment Publisher: Atlus ESRB: E Online: Wireless Exchange Available: April 21



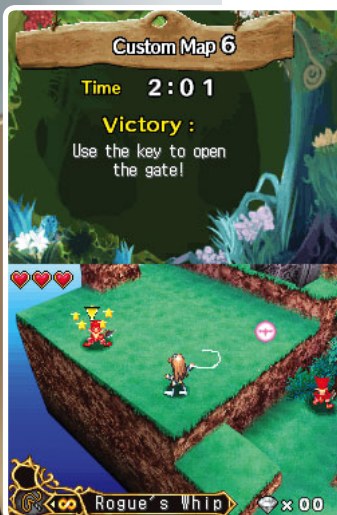
"Climax hasn't lost a step when it comes to setting a stage."

Steal Princess

She'll steal you alright...

words Dave Halverson

Whip those switches into shape!



It's been a long time since I popped in a game and saw the familiar Climax Entertainment logo, but it still takes me back to the time and place I first played *LandStalker* down to the most minute detail. It's funny how profound an effect 16-bit games had on us, or at least on me. I can conjure up the OST and just about any labyrinth from *LandStalker* (and its spiritual successor *Dark Savior*) down to the key to the exit, but I couldn't tell you a single other thing I did that year other than bemoan "The Spaghetti Incident?"

So here I am, 15 years later looking at essentially the same gameplay, only instead of one continuous actionRPG, Climax deal out the tac-action in SP one map at a time, which makes perfect sense on a system where it's common practice to squeeze in 5 or 10 minutes of gameplay while you wait for your half-caf double-tall triple-shot nonfat three-pump three-Splenda whole-milk-foam caramel macchiato in a double cup (no lid, with wings). That's why a game like *Steal Princess* is a mixed bag for me. My expectations are for it to be *LandStalker*, but I suppose I should just get over it, take my macchiato and go see what our friend Yoshifumi Hashimoto has been up to.

Climax hasn't lost a step when it comes to setting a stage. The game opens with a full-length anime-style intro, featuring Anise's sexy bod and oodles of slick animation before pouring you into the game's initial set piece, and the reality that is Anise's DS-type cartridge persona. She may be smoking hot in the intro and dialogue screens but on the play field she's as cute as a button—your classic, well-proportioned, slightly pixilated 3D cutie-pie reporting for duty, only with puffy white ankle boots that make it sound like she's wearing a pair of toilet plungers. It's all very cheeky and Japanese-cool (the best kind), but little Mrs. kleptomaniac has a job to do, so into the sea of cycling single-screen mini levels (maps) we go! *Steal Princess* is like a single-serving smorgasbord of isometric puzzle-action mini-bites... that, once in awhile, bite back, which considering it's from Climax is a very good thing. The only problem so far is looking at the same terrain over and over through 20-plus maps before taking on the big kahuna (area boss) and heading to the next region. It takes a good two hours to reach Mountain Aqueducts where things really begin to heat up. There's a fun little story in here too—good writing—and a cool map creator that allows you to build your own mouse traps and trade with any commoners you might know.



System: DS

Developer: Matrix Software

Publisher: Marvelous Ent. / XSEED

ESRB: E10+

Multi: 1 player

Available: March

review

Avalon Code

Say goodbye to Avalon

words Eric L. Patterson



"My goal is strictly the re-population of mankind, I swear baby!"

Of all the genres that you could imagine the DS would end up excelling in, would one have predicted that it would become such an RPG powerhouse? The split the genre now exists in—between the graphical giants hitting the high-tech console scene and the resurgence of low-fi-but-lovable titles making their way to the handheld—is quite interesting, and nowhere shown as perfectly as how the kings of the kingdom, Final Fantasy XIII and DragonQuest IX, now sit on completely opposite ends of the technology spectrum.

This all actually may or may not have any relevance here, because while Avalon Code is a DS RPG, it also kinda isn't. Pieced together by Matrix Software—folks who have a knack for doing this kind of thing, having developed the DS ports of Final Fantasy III and IV—it has many of the familiar gears that typically make the RPG engine run. Yet there's also a decent helping of adventure, as time not spent in town talking to NPCs or watching cutscenes is spent instead dispatching monsters in real-time fast-action combat, or trying to beat the clock in the many time-based dungeon rooms you'll come across.

So Avalon Code is sort of action-adventure-RPG, I suppose. Whatever you call it, it's a final product that plays pretty decently and looks, at its best moments,

"... in a very welcome twist, your job this time isn't to save the world..."

absolutely stunning. (There were times while playing where, all hyperbole aside, I stopped to take a moment to appreciate what I was seeing, because I was honestly surprised at what my little DS was cranking out.)

Then, however, there's the catch to all of this.

A wonderful, devilishly clever little catch, something that seems so small at first but then propels Avalon Code from being that not-too-shabby little action-adventure-RPG into being something special.

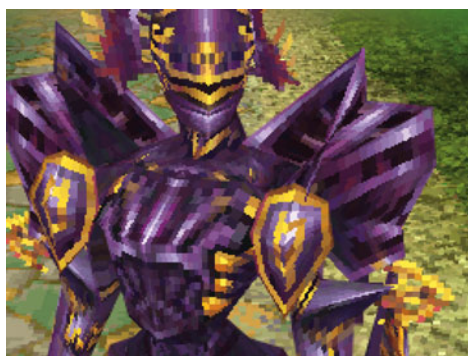
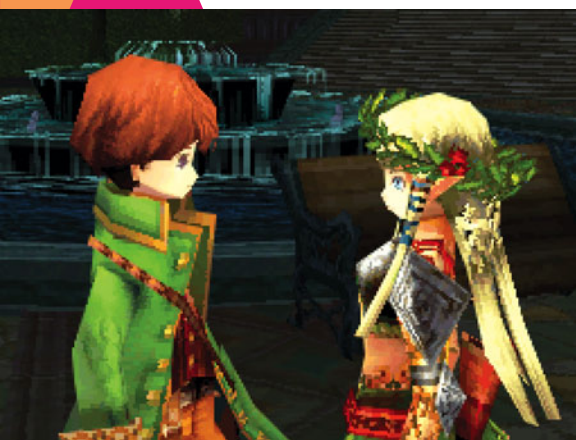
When the storyline kicks off after picking your hero's name and sex, you are almost instantly handed two things: a tome called the Book of Prophecy, and the understanding that the world is soon to come to an end. Ah, but in a very welcome twist, your job this time isn't to save the world, but instead to use the Book to record the people, creatures, and items that you want to take with you when you, the Chosen One, pass on to the world's rebirth.

Smacking things with the Book of Prophecy creates a new page for them, a page made up in part with the game's big, before-mentioned catch: the Code table. Here, everything added to the book has a set selection of attributes; set, that is, until you see fit to change them. As you play Noah, collecting those that you wish to save from the coming judgement, you can also play God, modifying weapons to be stronger, villagers to be healthier, items to be more useful, or monsters to be easier to defeat.

The Book of Prophecy, and its potential for changing elements of the game through Code swapping, provides an enthralling experience. It also, unfortunately, provides Avalon Code's one real frustration. You can only hold four Codes on-hand at a time for swapping around, and as the Book's page count grows, there's no real way to track which Codes you've placed where. When it comes time that you need to, say, add Illness to a particular monster or the Fire attribute to your sword, tracking down those Code pieces can mean tediously flipping from page to page until you find where you left them. It's a relatively small blemish on what is otherwise a vastly enjoyable game, but it's a small mistake that could easily have been prevented.

parting shot

Avalon Code's few missteps are overshadowed by the many things it gets right. This is a game that feels unique and special in its own way, and a title that you hopefully won't lose track of in the ridiculous flood of quality DS titles we're currently drowning in.



preview

System: DS Developer: Killaware Publisher: Ignition Entertainment Available: March

Lux-Pain

Psychic Justice for All

With Japan's entire supply of small-developer RPGs being snapped up by Atlus, other localization houses are experimenting with more exotic genres. There's no shortage of Japanese digital comics awaiting a western home, but outside of Capcom's Phoenix Wright series, such games have seen little success in the states. I doubt Ignition Entertainment will fare much better with Lux-Pain, but at least they've chosen a strong title with which to make a stand.

Lux-Pain is organized like an episodic anime series, telling the story of secret agency FORT and their ongoing battle against the Silent, a psychic virus that is infecting people and leading them to violent and suicidal behavior. The possible origin of the virus has been traced to Kisaragi City, where you play as young agent Atsuki Saijo, going undercover at the local high school to search for infected students and staff.

Most of the investigation unfolds through conversation with the residents of Kitaragi City, but when Atsuki senses something amiss, he can use his psychic powers to read the residual thoughts left by those in states of emotional distress.



These thoughts are represented as glowing worms you must capture in a touch-screen mini-game, which breaks up the gameplay nicely. (There's also a lame Whack-a-Mole-style mini-game when you battle the Silent.)

With simple gameplay, digital comics rely heavily on the strength of their writing and the charm of their cast. The limited voice work in Lux-Pain is surprisingly strong, but the written dialogue is packed



so full of errors that it can be almost incomprehensible in its current state. [This was supposed to be a review copy, but since the text is still being edited, we'll hold out for the final version before passing judgment; Ignition notes the fixes have been made.] Despite the choppy text, I've been enjoying the dark tone of Lux-Pain, which is a rarity on the DS. I'm also impressed with its volume of content. The game has over 20 chapters



of around an hour each, which is a pretty epic length for a digital comic. And while there are slow parts, the game never feels padded; there are no sequences where you have to tap every object on the screen in search of clues, and there's no aimless wandering since the game only lets you visit areas where there's something new to find. Hopefully Ignition Entertainment has the budget to give this lengthy thriller the localization it deserves. **Casey Loe**

review

System: DS Developer: Success Publisher: Atlus ESRB: T Multi: 1 Player Available: March 2009

Tokyo Beat Down

The adventures of Lewis Cannon and his partner Tuofur Dishet

I have a bit of a problem with the idea of playing out the life of a hard-boiled Japanese cop on the mean streets of Tokyo, mainly because I'm a bit suspicious of the existence of said "mean streets." During the time I spent in Osaka—a city usually known for being meaner and, er, streetier than Tokyo—it wasn't often that I, a 5'8" white boy, wasn't the scariest person around.

That said, I do love the premise, which is why I wish Tokyo Beat Down had turned out better than it did. The side scrolling beat-em-up portions of the game are fun, but lack a level of polish and depth when compared to games that have graced this genre before. As well, the action ends up being overshadowed by a surprisingly large number of lengthy cinematics. While well crafted—especially when paired with a fabulous translation by Atlus—you'll end up spending far more time reading about action than living it, making TBD feel more like Final Fantasy than Final Fight. **Eric L. Patterson**

"...the action ends up being overshadowed by a surprisingly large number of lengthy cinematics."



System: PSP Developer: Pyramid / Japan Studios Publisher: SCEA Available: May 2009

preview

Patapon 2

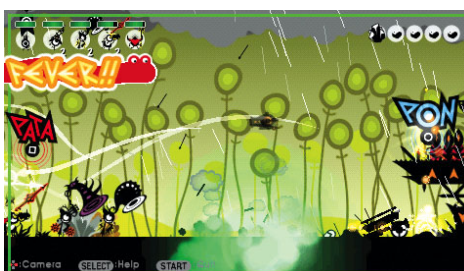
Pata pata pon and on and on

A real-time tactical action game where you play a God that controls his armies by rhythmic music? Utterly ridiculous!

Indeed, it sounded crazy at the time, but Sony's groundbreaking PSP title Patapon ended being a completely original and fascinating title, one that joined together with LocoRoco to stand proud as symbols of how amazingly creative the gaming scene on Sony's portable prodigy could be.

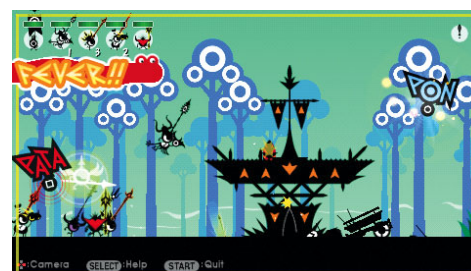
LocoRoco recently made a triumphant return with a quite-improved sequel, and now not far behind comes Patapon 2. Things pick up right where the original game left off, as the Patapons set sail in their newly constructed boat headed for Earthend, only to run into a gigantic sea creature which tears their ship to shreds.

And thus begins this second chapter of the Patapon saga, as you must help those Patapons that washed ashore on an unknown land not only regroup, but also deal with the not-so-friendly natives that call the place



home. Gameplay-wise, one of the most notable changes is the expansion of available unit types, with three previously-unseen standard units joining the flock along with an all-new "Hero" Patapon. No doubt taking a cue from other real-time strategy games, the new Hero unit is a stronger, more powerful character, one that can adapt itself to take on the role of any class.

Possibly most surprising for Patapon 2, however, is the introduction of a multiplayer mode, where up to four players can join together to safely escort mysterious eggs through enemy territory so that they can be safely hatched. **Eric L. Patterson**



System: DS Developer: Grasshopper Manufacture / h.a.n.d. Publisher: Marvelous Ent. USA / XSEED Available: April 2009

preview

Flower, Sun, and Rain

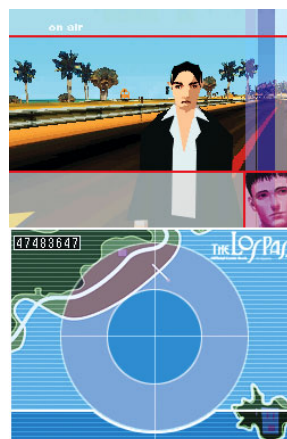
An island trapped in a time loop. What could go wrong?

Day 1. I've arrived at Flower, Sun, and Rain resort. Not five minutes after reaching the island, I was sticking a computer probe into the eye socket of a trucker I met in the parking lot in order to input my date of birth into his brain. I wonder if a man can ever get used to that sort of thing.

Day 2. Edo, the hotel manager, has called me here because a terrorist is making threats to the resort, and I'm the only one who can solve this mystery before it's too late. With the help of my trusty digital assistant Catherine, I can link in to various items and devices in order to find out what secrets this place holds.

Day 3. I think I may be stuck in a time loop. I've got to figure out what the hell is going on here before I become another casualty of this accursed place. Oh, I also finished off my day by kicking a soccer ball-shaped bag into an airplane, causing the jet to burst into flames. Odd. **Eric L. Patterson**

Lost meets The Prisoner. Fun ensues?



System: PSP Developer: Pentavision Publisher: PM:Studios Online: 1-2 Players ESRB: Teen Available: Now

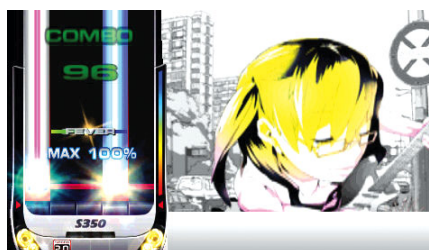
review

DJ Max Fever

UMD round round baby round round...

DJ Max Fever is a music/rhythm game where, like many other games in the genre, you must hit buttons in time to on-screen indicators. DJ Max Fever is a game that isn't just hard, but is utterly gleeful in making you feel like you suck at games, even with it sporting the slightly controversial "Black Label" addition of auto-correction. DJ Max Fever contains an eclectic selection of music, which includes more than a few tracks sung in Korean.

And, most importantly, DJ Max Fever is a magnificent, makes-you-glad-to-own-a-PSP experience. Yes, it may be a very... very... similar game to Konami's Beatmania, but what Pentavision has put together in this series is top-notch, resulting in something that starts as a clone but ends up standing on its own. For this custom North American release, excluding a few bugs here and there that will hopefully soon be squashed, the job PM:Studios did to give this series its first chance on our shores is pretty commendable; kudos, especially, for not feeling the need to butcher the trademark soundtrack with "Americanization." **Eric L. Patterson**



STILL ALIVE:

AOU 2009

The fighting game renaissance may have ebbed, but Japanese arcades keep on truckin'.

words Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama

By anyone's estimation, 2008 was an astonishing year for arcade games. Although the quaint image of coin-munching uprights lives on only in Japan, arcade titles still inform the larger gaming landscape to a remarkable degree. Last year's fighting game renaissance, led by Street Fighter IV, continues to bear fruit with BlazBlue, The King of Fighters XII, and Tekken 6 Bloodline Rebellion. New games may have been sparse at the annual AOU ("Arcade Operator's Union") Show this year—Capcom didn't have anything at all to show, for instance—but Japanese arcadegoers still have a fair chunk of quality to look forward to in 2009. KoF XII is just around the corner, new driving and gun shooting games were plentiful, and Sega's impressive 10-on-10 net-connected mech actioner Border Break looked stellar. Without further delay, a look at the sights of AOU 2009, held the last weekend of February at Tokyo's Makuhari Messe convention center.



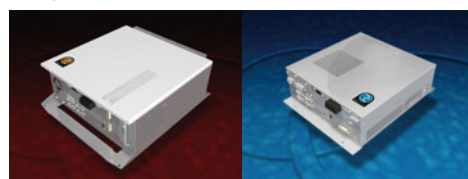
SEGA

Border Break, developed by AM2, spiritual successor to VirtualOn. It was unquestionably the Game of Show, and will perhaps become the defining Japanese arcade title of 2009. The first game to run on Sega's new PC-based RINGEDGE and RINGWIDE arcade boards (Intel CPUs, NVIDIA GPUs, Windows Embedded, and a solid state disk for storage), Border Break uses a wholly unique arcade control scheme incorporating a flightstick-style throttle and mouse (!). Up to 20 players can compete in 10-on-10 network battles using their own ultra-customizable mechs, saved on personal IC cards sized to fit in your wallet. Although obviously inspired by games like Mobile Suit Gundam: Bonds of the Battlefield and Gundam VS Gundam, Border Break is light-years beyond those games in tech and scope. In addition to BB, Sega was also showing titles like the quiz game Answer x Answer 2, new hovercraft racer AquaRace Extreme, and a very, very early 2D fighting collaboration with Milestone known as Project Cerberus.



Border Break control panel: Border Break's unique throttle-and-mouse control scheme.

RINGEDGE and RINGWIDE boards: Sega's new PC-based arcade boards, RINGEDGE and RINGWIDE.





KONAMI

If Sega had the quality, Konami had the quantity. The just-released, whip-waggle-riffic *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow* looks absolutely fantastic, running on high-spec PC-based hardware, but the new offerings were... how to put this kindly?... not quite electrifying. The *Bishibashi* is a simple collection of button-tapping minigames, and *Ball Toss Kingdom Gashaaaan!* Second Helping allows the player to mime throwing balls at an extra-long wide screen for genial Wii-style fun. No Konami booth would be complete with the requisite flood of incremental music games, and in this department titles were legion: *DrumMania V6 BLAZING!!!!*, *GuitarFreaks V6 BLAZING!!!!*, *beatmania IIDX16*, *pop'n music THE MOVIE*, *Dance Dance Revolution X*, and the unique new cube-manipulating *Jubeat*. Rounding out Konami's slate was *Quiz Magic Academy VI*, the latest update to the wildly popular fantasy-themed quiz game.



TAITO

If nothing else, Taito won the Best Slogan of Show award for their new tagline "No Kou Game," meaning roughly, "No-Thinking Games." It's come to this in a post-Brain Training world: Twitch game rebellion. Embodying this ethos were *Haunted Museum*, a gun shooting game projected on an 80" screen employing a flashlight gimmick, *Music Gungun!*, a funky fusion of rhythm and shooting, and the spectacular *Elevator Action: Death Parade*, a brilliant re-imagining of the 80s classic. The action is 3D, and you travel in a virtual elevator—complete with physical sliding doors!—gradually ascending a skyscraper with guns blazing.



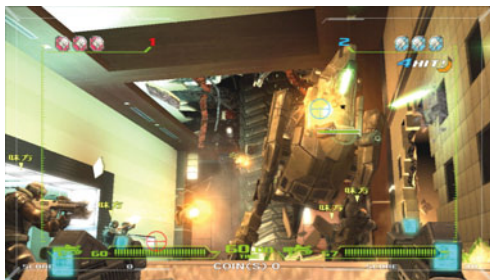
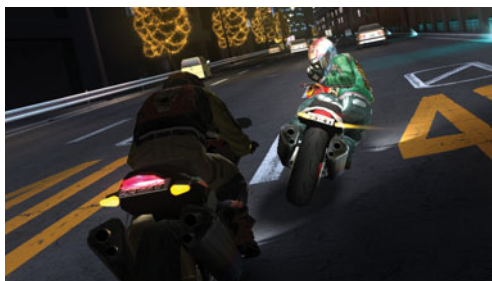
ATLUS

I can honestly say I never expected *Power Instinct* to return. Yet, astoundingly, that is just what Atlus had on display: A new entry in the series, bearing the Japanese title *Goketsuji Ichizoku*: Senzo Kuyo. The first *Power Instinct* in six years, *Senzo Kuyo* recycles sprites from the last entry in the series, *Matrimalee* for Neo Geo. Nonetheless, at least four new Range Murata-designed characters will be joining the fray in the final version, although at only 30% completion, it could be quite a ways off.



BANDAI NAMCO

Traditional arcade powerhouse Bandai Namco had something of a weak lineup this year at AOU, displaying only Nirin and Razing Storm, games already shown at the AIM Show several months ago. Nirin (fancy Japanese for "two-wheeler") is a 4-player motorcycle racer, and Razing Storm, running off PlayStation 3 arcade hardware, is a machine gun shooter. Also playable was Gundam VS. Gundam NEXT, the arcade release of which is imminent.



EXAMU

Examu, the House that Arcana Heart Built, are making a complete 180° for their next fighting game: Demon Bride, running on the company's own proprietary eX-BOARD hardware. If Arcana Heart was about moe loli-girls, Demon Bride is about achingly gorgeous, willowy boys... a game aimed directly at the fujoshi, or fangirl set. The visuals are beautiful, and the gameplay fascinating—each character has a demon or angel helper, similar to Capcom's Jojo's Bizarre Adventure. If your masculinity is not easily compromised, Demon Bride could be one to watch.



CAVE

The only new shooter of note at AOU this year, Cave's Death Smiles II: Merry Christmas From Hell did not disappoint. As the sequel to last year's gothic lolita blast-'em-up, it was essentially more of the same... but when it's Cave quality, that's exactly what fans want.

THE GIRLS ARE HERE!

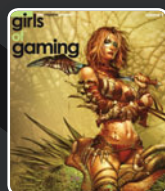
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preview

System: PC, Xbox 360 (TBD) Developer: Acony Publisher: K2 Network Available: Summer



Parabellum

Soldiers in sync on the brink of the apocalypse



Visceral street combat in a dense side district.

THE ART OF RELOADING
Similar to Gears of War, Parabellum includes an optional weapon reload mini-game that rewards players for performing a perfectly-timed reload.

"...the strategic ebb and surge of offense and defense, and statistics that tell no lies."

words Mike Griffin

Multiplayer first-person shooters saved my life. Yeah, I said it. I can lean on them like an old friend. Whenever I'm uninspired or over-saturated by another genre and other forms of gameplay, I'll hop on a packed Counter-Strike, Team Fortress 2 or CoD server and all my woes melt away in a hail of raw, reticulated-to-the-noggin satisfaction. To engage in such contemporary multiplayer hits competitively online is, to me, the equivalent of playing real life sports: relentless on-field decision making, meaningful team coordination with instant repercussions, and you absolutely must train hard to compete with the best. Like the world's favorite team sports, the best competitive online shooters become mainstays when people fundamentally enjoy the game: the rules of play, use of field and position, the strategic ebb and surge of offense and defense, and statistics that tell no lies. Enter Parabellum, the work of ace German developer Acony. In a crowded arena of multiplayer FPS hopefuls, Parabellum may rise to become the new sport of champions.

IF YOU WANT PEACE, PREPARE FOR WAR

A few years from now we may be able to refer to Parabellum as an online mercenary simulator. Acony has huge, huge social plans for the game that paints a massively multiplayer picture for its future. Let's begin in the present, however. The hands-on play I experienced was a great snapshot of Parabellum's core values: extremely fast-paced Counter Strike-style FPS action with undiluted clarity of purpose. Even in very early beta form it's glaringly obvious that Acony has nailed a basic feel and flow that online FPS players will appreciate. Acony has invited pro CS players to test and feedback the game and the consensus is that Parabellum is actually faster-paced than Valve's revered classic.

A batch of 11 maps will form the initial Parabellum playground, set in a sprawling Unreal Engine 3-powered New York City. The year is 2018, the conflict is Counter Terrorist

Forces versus Syndicate, and the threat is multi-faceted, driven by an end game agenda of nuclear Hell on Earth: mushroom clouds over NYC. Entering the game involves logging into the Combat Intelligence Network, a clever community-based front end that sort of feels like you're manning a computer at the CTU offices on 24. Here players will form societies, tinker with a mind-blowing amount of character customization (full details ahead), and line up matches and campaigns.

Acony has major plans for the CIN, perhaps looking to titles like Huxley as future competition. After Parabellum settles into its commercial release, the developer will begin to roll-out extensive MMO-like additions ranging from clan HQs to large social gathering areas where 100+ players can (peacefully) hang out, chat, roleplay, trade equipment, and form squads. With so many ways to keep players



That's one way to hail a cab.



connected and interacting, Parabellum will need an all-powerful hook, a potential that compliments and extends beyond its solid squad shooter core and social systems. That potential is the campaign mode.

THE REAL WMD: NON-LINEAR CAMPAIGNS

Frank Trigub, Creative Director and inspirational lifeblood of the Parabellum project, neatly sums up the campaign game: "Think of the really focused design of a single-player mode, but combined with tactical team gameplay." Acony is planning other epic campaigns in settings ranging from jungles to desert ruins, but the first experience will be New York, so this will be the target of our analysis. First, a general sense of the campaign: it's like Counter-Strike meets Enemy Territory. Imagine several stand-alone CS maps, each with defined, measurable objectives, linked together to form stages within

a larger campaign. Parabellum's inimitable twist is its non-linearity: the overall map includes several forking paths along the way, allowing teams to tactically plot their progress through a web of navigation choices.

That's where it gets interesting. The CTF and Syndicate teams can each claim full control of these sub-maps in the campaign as they advance, and this entails reaching a specific objective. While it may behoove one team to select a seemingly faster route, each objective will provide a specific utility that may be tactically and situationally the most intelligent choice at the time. One pathway might lead to an abandoned residential zone with a prized mortar cannon, allowing a team to rain death on a key enemy choke point, forcing the opposing squad to quickly coordinate a new strategy or become a gore stain in a crater.

Another path may lead to a helicopter pad, eminently useful as a means to quickly advance to distant campaign sections, but a seriously vulnerable pain in the ass to defend (hello, snipers) as the chopper makes it approach. Every zone in a campaign presents such real-time tactical assessments, the relentless on-field decision making and meaningful team coordination I referenced earlier. Better make sure your VOIP mic is working for this one. Since not everyone has the time to play through a long campaign, Acony is designing scale into time investment: 45-minute rounds will have a smaller cluster of zones, while glorious multi-hour epics will be hosted within massive, densely-packed campaign maps, with team size tentatively ranging from an intimate 5 vs. 5 to a pleasantly chaotic 16 vs. 16.



A work-in-progress campaign map: Districts to seize, special zones to unlock, cannons to activate, helipads to secure, VIPs to liberate or ventilate, each path a deliberation of tactics and squad load-out.



STEFAN HEINRICH LEAD 3D ARTIST

Stefan is the man responsible for Parabellum's outstanding character customization system. He helps to create and manage assets like helmets, night-vision goggles, kevlar vests, and ammo pouches, ensuring that over a million combinations of equipment remain completely interchangeable.

UNFORGETTABLE, THAT'S WHAT YOU ARE

Parabellum's current and future focus on deep social elements invariably creates the need for tools of self-expression. While other online FPS titles present similar offerings, few can match Parabellum's remarkable depth of customization. From helmet to combat boots, your mercenary is primed for physical and fashion modifications to the tune of over 1.2 million completely interchangeable combinations. Hair, face, head, chest, hands, legs, and feet can be adorned with all manner of décor, logos, accessories and armor, from alluring tactical ops-themed standards to wild, unorthodox punk rocker outfits that scream, "I know I'm good, that's why I'm wearing pink fatigues and a bright blue mohawk—gimme your best shot."





MIKE SMOUT SENIOR ANIMATOR

The amiable Aussie Mike Smout commands the animation team at Acony, ensuring that every aim, crouch and attack looks spectacular. Recently Mike has been tackling the victory pose system, whereby players can stand atop defeated foes and execute amusing taunts like air guitars and golf tee shots.

There are currently twelve weapons in the game, ranging from snipers and automatic rifles to the lovely Beneli shotty. Weapons, too, can be fully customized with paints, decals and up to seven performance mods apiece (silencers, compressors, grips, laser sights and more).



Acony highlighted weapons as an example of Parabellum's excellent potential for item economy. The game, completely free to download and play, will be monetized via micro-transactions. Purchasable items will never provide a significant power

advantage; your sweet new shotgun may have a small damage perk, but it's limited and temporary. On the other hand, weapons will be persistent entities, each with their own profiled history of violence. Let's say a top player one day decides to sell his trusty shotgun, and fellow players know this bad ass has crowned a legion of victims with a face full of pellets from that evil shotty. When his legendary boomstick hits the black market, all players will see the gun's statistical record of carnage and many will bid for a taste of that renown.

UNREAL OPTIMIZATIONS

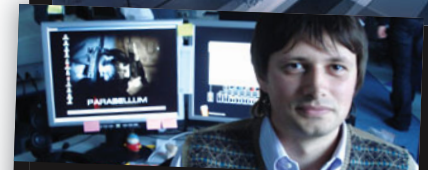
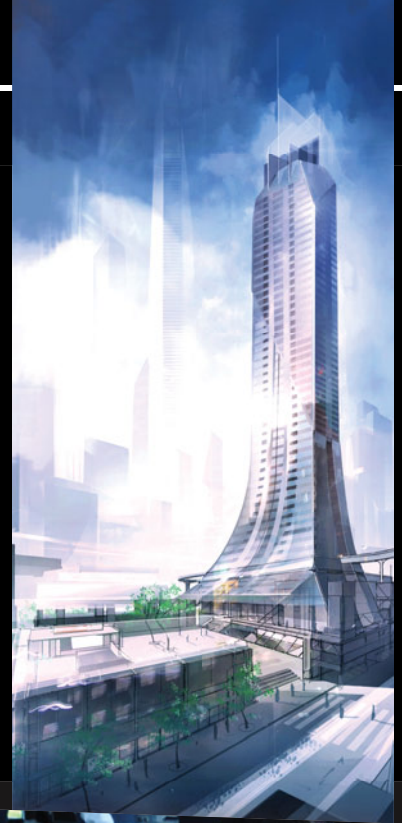
During its early focus tests and player feedback sessions, Acony discovered that most pro FPS players will reduce resolution, texture quality and effects to maintain a perfectly smooth frame rate, seeking any competitive

advantage. They also noted that client download size plays a huge role in the initial adoption of a free-to-play title. As a result, Acony decided long ago to make Parabellum as scalable as possible. Acony's Technical Director, Andriy Umryk, explained that Unreal Engine 3 is especially adept at channeling third-party plug-ins and Parabellum has already embraced favorites like SpeedTree, the zippy and ubiquitous foliage king.

The real magic solution to reduce Parabellum's relative footprint size is Allegorithmic's ever-impressive ProFX compression middleware. ProFX permits artists to compile textures into code, essentially allowing the engine to procedurally generate textures on demand instead of storing and loading monolithic chunks of raw, fatty textures.

From subway routes to rooftops, the city has both breadth and verticality.

CTF and Syndicate forces clash in a second floor stand-off as the chopper arrives.



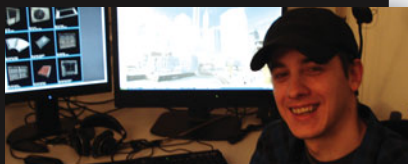
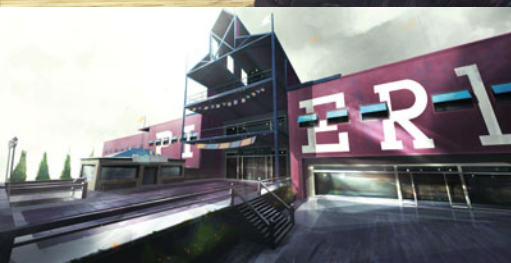
ANDRIY UMRYK TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

Mr. Umryk leads a very busy team of engine programmers and engineers at Acony. He spends his days adrift in a sea of optimization, convincing Unreal Engine 3 that it's far more flexible than advertised. When you see Parabellum running like a gazelle on your three year old PC, think of Andriy.





"...Acony has nailed a basic feel and flow that online FPS players will appreciate."



MARK MUSSLER LEAD LEVEL DESIGNER

Coming from a pro Counter-Strike player background, Mark Mussler proves to be an excellent choice for lead level designer on Parabellum. Where you and I may see a realistic street scene, Mark is looking at an arena with tactical considerations like line of sight and pacing, timed to the last second.



MICHAEL WENDING SOUND DESIGNER

When he's not helping to cut lucrative pop tracks for various music labels, Michael Wendling hides in a dark sound-proof chamber at Acony firing off rib-rattling virtual rounds from assault rifles. His next big task is to assemble a range of helpful context sensitive squad voice commands.

What does this mean to you and me when the game is released? Parabellum will roll down your broadband pipe in a lean, Acony-mandated client size of under 1GB, and the game will run smoothly on PCs with minimal memory. Acony co-founder Frank Trigub comments, "This technology is paving the way for free-to-play developers and gamers. By using ProFX we could increase the amount of high-quality content and optimize the download size by factor ten."

Another draw of Unreal Engine 3 is that even when you optimize it down to a low-spec entry point, as is the case here, it still has the basic rendering horsepower to provide for low cost normal mapping, big combat effects, and cool ancillary frills like rows of fully-rendered buildings in the distance, tug-boats steaming past in a far-away harbor, or flocks of pigeons that can be fragged into particles of shredded feathers. The Parabellum engine and tools are ready to rock on Xbox 360 and this version remains a distinct possibility; unfortunately, this isn't the easiest of business models to translate to console.

EMPOWERED EXPANSION

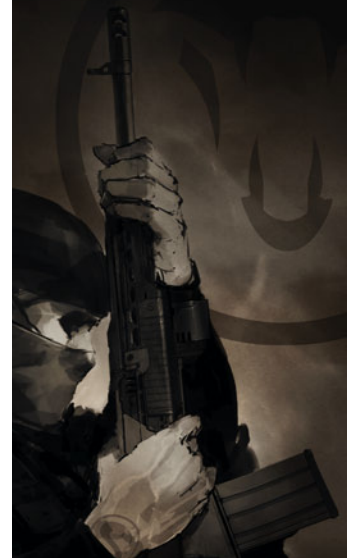
As Parabellum grows into its massively multiplayer aspirations, the community's need for new content may begin to outstrip Acony's ability to deliver. One of the best ways to maintain a steady flow of new maps and campaigns is to place the creative tools in the hands of players, precisely what Acony intends to do. A huge core database of assets and artwork will be available to map makers and the editor will empower creators with complete control over campaign and objectives structuring. Not only is there the possibility that your maps will enter the official pool, you may also be personally selected by Acony to help built-out a brand new official campaign based on your industrious creations.

A HIT WAITING TO HAPPEN

Parabellum is at a crossroads right now. With one more key signing, the game could become a whirlwind success. One has only to look to Korea for an indicator: the ridiculously popular (and underwhelming) online FPS "Special Forces" topped all Korean game charts for months on end, at one point generating a stupendous \$6 million USD a month—all via micro-transactions. Thus far Acony has encountered the typical ingrained resistance to Western shooters in Korea, but given Parabellum's relative similarity to Counter-Strike and Special Forces, it seems like a fit. If it breaks through in Korea, there's every possibility that Acony may never have to worry about conquering another territory, including the US.

Parabellum shouldn't have much difficulty finding a fan base in virtually any region. Beyond its unwavering core gameplay, high-endless customization, and strong community features, there's the rich potential of its game-defining campaign system. Acony is also making all the right peripheral moves. For example, how do you keep players of the same skill level together (a.k.a. preventing newbs from getting owned by experts and quitting)? You set up a fair and complex metrics system to track players' individual skills and tendencies, then you marry it to the match-making system to ensure players are dropped into combat that suits their ability. As players improve, the system adjusts accordingly. Don't worry, this doesn't trap you: if you and your less experienced buddies want to form a private squad together, by all means—fire up the game, create a password-protected squad and enter the fray.

The next stop for Parabellum is this year's Game Developer Conference, where Acony and GamersFirst.com will be on hand to demo the latest milestone. By early summer, Acony intends to move into open beta with three or four of its most polished maps, however don't expect to see the long view of Parabellum—including the full CIN, tournament and campaign system—until later in the year. Is it worth the wait? Indeed, it is. Besides, unless you don't have an internet connection, free-to-play means there isn't a damn thing preventing you from test-driving this intense team shooter. Who knows, maybe one day you'll walk away a world champion.





Ask Alienware

033 | 04_09

In this edition we weigh the pros and cons of CPU and GPU overclocking, provide tips for comfortable, high quality PC gaming in the living room, relate hard drive RPM speeds to games, and compare popular digital audio cables.

q. I downloaded a video card and motherboard tweaking app from EVGA and I've fiddled with it a bit—only baby steps so far, a humble 10MHz overclock. I really want to know which is better to overclock the most: the CPU or my video card? Before you answer “a balance of both,” seriously: which one provides the most bang for clock frequency increases in modern games? Len, NJ



Alienware: We won't go as far as saying, “a balance of both,” but the answer still may not be as definitive as you're looking for. The truth is, it depends on the type of game you're playing. Do you play games that draw more from the CPU or the GPU? Real-Time Strategy games, for example, are much more CPU-intensive. It takes raw horsepower to manage large armies and the more troops you push out the more your CPU has to work. Graphics power takes a back seat. In First-Person Shooter games, it's all about the graphics. GPU overclocking lets you crank up the texture resolution and anti-aliasing without sacrificing frame rates, and that could mean the difference between watching an enemy walk into your trap and watching yourself respawn from a headshot you never saw coming.

q. Looking to run the newest PC games at 1080p on my new Bravia. No longer will I be a slave to my desk and little monitors. First of all, are PC games going to stretch out correctly at widescreen 1080p? And what kind of hardware are we talking about to keep things

smooth and detailed on this lovely LCD at 1080p? Also: what's the best way to route sound from the PC to the Bravia? Couch fragging here I come! Mark, ON



Alienware: If your system doesn't have an HDMI output, use a DVI to HDMI converter. Most current video cards, and even most video cards dating back the past couple of years, should support displaying your games at 1080p. As for the games themselves, that's going to vary title by title. Some games may not support widescreen, and stretching them will distort the images, but this is a very small minority of titles. As for the rest of your hardware, as long as your video card supports DirectX 10 you're good to go. If your video card also has an HDMI output that supports audio, that's the best way to run sound to the TV. If not, go with an optical cable. For wireless chat you want to go Bluetooth headset.



“HDMI can handle up to eight channels of uncompressed HD audio.”

q. What kind of performance impact is there when you install and run games off a huge, slower hard drive? A buddy thinks I'm crazy to use my 500GB media storage drive for gaming as well. He says I should put games on my fastest drive, but it's too darn small for all my games! Anish, CA

Alienware: Ideally, yes, you always want to install games on the drive with the faster RPM speed and transfer rate. Doing so will minimize any delays or latency when loading the game. During the game, however, it shouldn't matter what size or speed drive you're using. Once you load the game, all the textures, maps and key elements of the game have been offloaded into your system memory or graphics memory. For games that have dynamic loading, where the game loads elements as you play, a faster drive will deliver a better experience with fewer wait times, but even in these games it's only when you're loading something new that you may experience a decrease in performance.

q. Is there any advantage to using optical audio cables versus HDMI sound? Does one offer inferior compression or superior data transfer of high quality sound from games and Blu-rays? How about this new connector type, DisplayPort—how does it compare for high-def audio data quality? Brent, MA

Alienware: There is absolutely an advantage, but the other way around. You want to go with HDMI. The maximum bit rate of an optical cable can only support uncompressed full HD audio on a two-speaker stereo setup. HDMI, on the other hand, can handle up to eight channels of uncompressed HD audio. DisplayPort carries more channels than optical, also eight channels, but HDMI offers support for Dolby HD and DTS-Master HD audio.



If you have a pressing hardware-related inquiry for the Alienware experts, regarding anything from motherboards and mice to bit rates and firewalls, send it along to askalienware@playmagazine.com. Each month we'll award our favorite Ask Alienware submission with a free one-year subscription, so don't be shy!

Please visit us at www.alienware.com/ask to read our Ask Alienware archives and learn about our latest products.

Atlus Online introduces **Neo Steam**

When Atlus USA teased fans with the announcement of “Atlus Online”, many wondered just what they had up their sleeves. Atlus has always been a major force in console and handheld gaming, but now it seems they’ve also set their sights on the lucrative PC market. Well, we’re proud to be able to bring to you a first look at the launch vessel for this new online community-based venture: *Neo Steam: The Shattered Continent*, a unique steampunk-themed MMO. We had an opportunity to field some service and game-related questions with Jamie Ortiz, the head of business operations over at Atlus Online.



play: The North American branch of Atlus has never had much of a presence in the PC gaming scene. What brought about the decision to finally give it a go?

Jamie Ortiz: Entering the online space has long been a dream of our president and CEO, Shinichi Suzuki. He set the vision to create a portal that would become the daily destination for a community of users seeking a new and exciting interactive entertainment experience, based on the foundation of great games and compelling content.

Is Atlus Online looking to be more of a publisher for titles created by other developers, or will we also see products that have ties to specific Atlus properties?

We are currently looking at quality, third-party titles to license. But that’s not to say we’ve ruled out major Atlus properties...

What about *Neo Steam: The Shattered Continent* made it a good choice for kicking off the new Atlus Online venture?

For our first title, we were looking for a robust MMORPG that had that distinctly unique Atlus flavor. We wanted to publish a game that would make sense to Atlus faithful, and at that same time appeal to a broad range of online gamers. After looking at a number of titles, we felt *Neo Steam: The Shattered Continent* really fit this mold. The game is set in a steampunk-fantasy world, filled with elements of magic and technology, and it has amazing art and great gameplay.

For gamers who might have a hard time choosing between the large amount of MMO offerings we’re



“The game is set in a steampunk-fantasy world, filled with elements of magic and technology...”

now faced with, what most about *Neo Steam* would you say makes it stand out from the pack?

What really made *Neo Steam: The Shattered Continent* stand out in our eyes was its take on the genre. The game features a unique environment that places traditional fantasy MMORPG elements in an immersive steampunk setting. The primary energy resource in the game is Neo Steam, and players will use it for a variety of purposes, including crafting items, strengthening equipment, and riding steam balloons and individual mounts. It is also used in machine-based skills, specifically in a new technology which enables players to install Machine Cores onto weapons and armor to gain new abilities.

Neo Steam: The Shattered Continent also provides players with the opportunity for a unique PvP combat experience that ranges from one-on-one arena battles to group raids on the opposing nation’s towns, and even all-out warfare between the two nations, where players can choose to duke it out on the ground or wreak havoc in one of a variety of siege engines, large vehicles of war used to attack enemy forces.

We look forward to getting our hands on *Neo Steam: The Shattered Continent*, as well as seeing where Atlus Online goes from here. Thanks Jamie!



April 2009

Top-Selling PC Titles For January 2009

01	World of Warcraft: Wrath of the Lich King	Blizzard
02	The Sims 2 Double Deluxe	EA Maxis
03	World Of Warcraft: Battle Chest	Blizzard
04	Spore	EA Maxis
05	World of Warcraft	Blizzard
06	Left 4 Dead	Valve
07	The Sims 2: Apartment Life Expansion Pack	EA Maxis
08	Fallout 3	Bethesda
09	Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3	EA LA
10	Call Of Duty: World At War	Treyarch



Left 4 Dead

Command & Conquer: Red Alert 3



Economical Upgrades for your Performance-Starved Computer

Do those few necessary computer upgrades seem financially out of reach? When value is the name of the game, a little research goes a long way to find high-quality "value" hardware that can breathe some life back into your system. OCZ Technology has a wealth of products catering to a tight budget, proving that even a few small investments can make a significant difference. So while you might not have the fanciest new toys on the block, at least you'll give your computer the extra energy it needs to last until your next major upgrade.

Simmer down your CPU...

If you're not quite ready to blow your money on that fancy new processor, overclock the last breath out of your CPU with a new cooler! The OCZ Vendetta 2 is a proven performer to crank out the last bit of juice, lowering temperatures far beyond your plain old stock cooler. Retaining a quiet atmosphere or sucking away damaging heat, the Vendetta 2 dips below the \$40 mark and maintains on-par performance with far more expensive coolers. When you're ready for that new Core™ i7, adaptor brackets are now available for purchase.



Pump up the Gigabytes...

Most users find 2GB the absolute minimum for Windows® Vista and graphic-intensive game titles, so go that extra mile to future-proof your system with 4GB—there's no better time to do it! Whether your flavor is DDR2 or DDR3, it's a veritable smorgasbord out there to find hot deals on cheap memory! The OCZ 4GB "Vista Upgrade" kit can be snagged for under \$50, even less if you find a rebate at your favorite reseller. For DDR3 users the Gold or Platinum Series are your best bet, so score a 1333MHz 4GB kit with proven overclockability for well under \$100. Not to mention you can have the "bling" without the extra bucks!



Peripheral Vision...

Sure, you can nab a high-priced keyboard with all the shiny lights and fancy buttons, or you can score the same features for less! For gamers, there is no more affordable choice than the Alchemy Series Elixir and the Illuminati keyboards, both hovering around the \$30 mark. Not plain-Jane office boards, the Elixir Series features 10 programmable macros with 3 modes for nearly unlimited customization. Or illuminate your life with the Illuminati series' backlit design and 10 media hotkeys for easy quick-launches. Never sacrificing quality, comfort, or style, both keyboards are a champion addition to your system...and only you'll know it didn't cost an arm and a leg!



OCZ Technology, an expert in tweaking and squeezing every ounce of performance out of RAM, has been a leader in the memory market since 2002. Founded by gamers, for gamers, OCZ has since been on a mission to deliver the very best PC gaming products to the masses.



EverQuest celebrates a decade of adventure

words Mike Griffin

T rue to its name, EverQuest shows no sign of ending. Sony Online Entertainment's venerable MMORPG commemorates its 10th anniversary on March 14th, 2009. These days, many epic struggles and fifteen expansions later, EQ settles for a stable subscriber base and a position slightly outside of the contemporary MMO spotlight dominated by others. However, make no mistake: the modern 3D massively multiplayer game you know and love would not be the same without the pioneering concepts introduced by EverQuest. I recently re-visited EQ1—after a *long* absence—on my beloved Ranger character, who, just like EQ, first hit the masses in March 1999. My guide and partner-in-nostalgia on this tour was Lydia Pope (a.k.a. Zatozia), one of a handful of 10-year veteran leads still hard at work on the EQ team.

Back in 1998 I had the pleasure of hosting a young, enthusiastic Brad McQuaid (EQ creator) during the first EverQuest press tours. You have to appreciate that back then, from a technical standpoint, EQ was totally unprecedented: A persistent state online universe run across multiple servers with a fully 3D world that *required* a 3D accelerator card to run? Hardcore! Along with a few other big titles at the time like Quake 2, EverQuest played a major role in the early adoption of 3D video cards. Everyone was blown away by Brad's demo: EverQuest's huge 3D environments and monsters, the freedom of navigation, the day-to-night cycle, and the fact that thousands could simultaneously share

this RPG experience together, logging in and out of a world that never ceased. It was an instant classic.

"What was your server and guild when you played EQ in the past?"

Lydia asks me in the guise of her Dark Elf character, Zatozia the Torturess. As lead GM in EQ, she's like the big sister that everyone knows—and plenty of players stop to wave. Zatozia hands out some consumable treats. We're standing in the Guild Hall area, the current-day hot spot for social gathering in EQ. "I was born right here on The Rathe server, just like you," I tell her through my elven avatar. "My guild was Noble Blade."

"Wow, cool. I know that guild well. I was GM on The Rathe back when the game had server-specific GMs. Some of my fondest memories of EQ are from back then," Zatozia reminisces. "I think what made it unique having server specific GMs is that you really got to know the community, and them you. This server had huge role playing events and wars that involved the entire server."

Those early skirmishes highlight one example of EverQuest's undeniable trailblazing when it comes to MMO grouping dynamics and large scale events. EQ introduced the concept of strong complimentary class roles in the modern MMO: the Tank, Healer, Buffer, Damage Dealer, Crowd Controller, Puller (one person designated to grab baddies and bring them back to the group); all such terms were ushered into modern MMO vernacular by EverQuest and its players as they embraced the new gameplay dynamics of a vast 3D



world. Dozens of colloquialisms and acronyms popularized via EQ remain cornerstones of MMO culture to this day. And it was EverQuest that standardized the concept of "raids"—introducing large scale cooperative player events and encounters that required elaborate team strategies, eventually providing formal game systems and a customizable user interface to manage raids of 70+ players.

"Ten years later, what keeps your EQ flame burnin'?" I ask Lydia. The community manager and Torturess answers: "Two things really. The lore of EverQuest is incredibly deep and evolving. I can't help but want to keep reading it, writing it and sharing it. I've been involved with the game lore since before I even started working on the game, and even when I wasn't directly writing for the game, I still found myself being part of it as a sort of lore historian. The other thing is the community. There's no other MMO community as close, dedicated and involved as the EQ community." After attending an entertaining guild raid against the twin gods Vallon and Tallon Zek later that evening (shout-outs to BotS on The Rathel), I can't help but agree with her.

What can EverQuest players look forward to during the 10th anniversary festivities? "We'll be premiering new content for the celebration: cool live events, contests, raids and challenges, something for all levels to participate in," Lydia explains. "We're also turning on *all* the great Fabled encounters. We're going to be focusing a lot on nostalgia. I mean MMORPGs don't turn 10 every day."

"There's no other MMO community as close, dedicated and involved as the EQ community." - Zatozia the Torturess

Romeo X Juliet

Wherefore art thou?

words Danica Davidson

The original play sets itself up by telling us, "Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene . . ." Meanwhile, this anime adaptation sets itself up with something more like, "Two households, scrambling for the throne, has a war that kills off all but Juliet of the Capulets, in fair Neo Verona where we lay our scene." No, it might not be for the Shakespeare purist or the English professor, but this Shakespearean anime is full of swashbuckling action and forbidden romance for everyone else.

Like in the original play, Romeo and Juliet are of enemy families and meet at a party, where it's love at first sight. Unlike the play, Juliet had been disguised as a boy for sixteen years in order to keep herself from being killed by the Montagues. She likes to dress herself up as a masked avenger, making her, oh, just a little more aggressive and assertive than her Shakespearean counterpart. Romeo, despite being engaged to another, still wants Juliet and no one else, despite the fact his father killed off all of Juliet's relatives and would like her dead too.

If anyone's wondering, no, the characters do not talk directly from the play. They do speak in a sort of semi-Shakespearean style, with fancier words and more old fashioned sentence structures. For those of you well-versed in the Bard's works, some outright quotes do get sneaked in. The Bard himself is in there, as a blond-haired friend of Juliet's named William. He pops up now and then, talking about the writing he's up to. Extra points if you can tell which quotes go to which play!

Besides changes to the story like killing off the Capulets and making Juliet a warrior, Neo Verona is not the same as the Italian Verona. Instead, it has flying dragon horses and Renaissance-esque surroundings. All this makes for a very unique take on the famous love story. *Romeo X Juliet* does an excellent job of drama and has a beautiful musical score to boot, giving it that epic feel. Its animation is perfectly colored in and some details—like the waving of flags—look as if they're real. While it might not be everyone's view of Shakespeare, it's an alluring and intriguing adaptation that sucks you in. Who knows, it might even get people more interested in the original.

parting shot

Just like the original. Except for the flying horses. And the cross-dressing Juliet. And the killing off of all the Capulets. And the blue hair...but everything else is EXACTLY the same. Yeah.

"...an alluring and intriguing adaptation that sucks you in."

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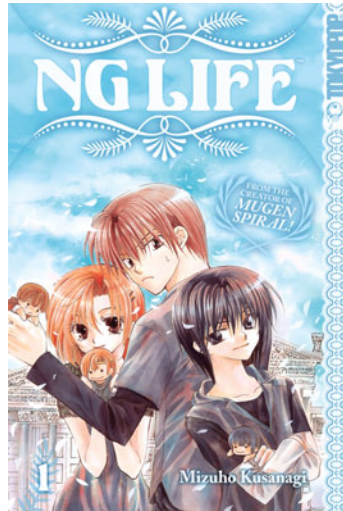
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Released By: Tokyopop Volume: 1 Rating: 13+ Avail: Mar 10, 2009 review

NG Life

Engage the silliness

In his past life, Keidai was a gladiator at the Roman city of Pompeii and was madly in love with his wife Serena. When the local volcano exploded and the two soulmates were killed, they vowed to meet up again. Flash forward to the present, where Keidai is a Japanese high school student surrounded by the reincarnations of his Pompeian friends. However, none of them remember what he remembers. Then the reincarnation of Serena moves into town and Keidai is ready to marry her again . . . except for the small problem that Serena has been reincarnated into a boy who has no interest in male/male relationships. Keidai doesn't care what new form Serena has taken on, but try telling the new Serena that. *NG Life* is a real screwball comedy, and while we all know true love triumphs in the end, there's still bound to be plenty of misunderstanding and silliness on the way. **Danica Davidson**



Read it if: You like kooky romantic comedies with past lives thrown in.

review Released By: Del Rey Volume: 1 Rating: 13+ Avail: Feb 24, 2009

Sayonara, Zetsubou-Sensei

A good way to go

Anything and everything can make schoolteacher Mr. Itoshiki paranoid. Anything and everything can make him plummet into despair. And that's why he's basically made it a game to off himself.

In case you haven't figured it out, *Sayonara, Zetsubou-Sensei* is a very morbid and one-of-a-kind comedy. Things invariably go wrong for our teacher's suicide attempt and he spends another day alive and teaching a very unusual class of students, especially this one girl who believes the glass is always half full. For Mr. Itoshiki, who makes his pupils write down lists of what they never hope to achieve, this sort of positive thinking is nothing short of annoying. And this manga, if you don't mind very black humor, is nothing short of a riot. This is a unique form of satire, showing how even if we don't get as happy as that one particular student, we don't need to be as depressed as Mr. Itoshiki, especially since everything depresses him. **Danica Davidson**



Read it if: You like your satire extra twisted.

Sayonara, Zetsubou-Sensei © 2005 by Koji Kumeta/KODANSHA Ltd. All rights reserved.

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A. MARQUIS DE SADE B. MARIE ANTOINETTE C. NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

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"If you give *D. Gray-man* a shot you'll find yourself strapped in for an addictive, rewarding ride."

D.Gray-man

デーグレイマン
Gray Matters

words Bill Gray

Beginnings are such difficult things, particularly in anime. It's really hard to create a first episode that not only sets the stage and introduces the viewer to the world, but manages to convey the full scope of the series and its characters as well as the show's unique qualities. I mention this in *D. Gray-man*'s case not because it succeeds in doing these things; rather, because it gets the basics right but fails to provide a compelling reason to come back to the show. Stick with it past the first few episodes, though, and it'll become clear that Funimation's *D. Gray-man* has the potential to be one of the best releases of 2009.

In typical anime fashion, *D. Gray-man* mixes humor, high drama, action, and fancy, impenetrable concepts that sound cooler than they actually are. Traveling Exorcist Allen Walker is on a mission from God: find and destroy every last Akuma in the world and recover a mysterious substance called "Innocence." These Akuma—the souls of the dearly departed called back when their loved ones curse God for their loss—initially take the form of monstrous floating eggs loaded for bear with virus-spewing guns, but evolve over time into deadlier, smarter, more powerful forms. Thankfully, Walker has powers of his own—an eye that can see Akuma, for one, and a gigantic, uber-powerful left arm capable of destroying most Akuma with a single blow. As Walker progresses along his quest, he's joined by other Exorcists from the Black Order, who will help him discover some of the truths about the ultimate purpose behind the Akuma, Innocence and himself.

Yeah, sounds pretty typical of the average shonen (anime for boys) series, I'll give you that. But underneath the little boy trappings beats the heart of a show with well-developed and intriguing characters, intense action/horror elements, and some moments of genuine humor. Be careful—if you give *D. Gray-man* a shot past those first few episodes, you'll find yourself strapped in for an addictive, rewarding ride.

parting shot

How could I not like a series that features my last name? Seriously though—there's more to this show than is hinted at in its initial episodes.

Heroic Age

Into outer space

Heroic Age is where sci-fi meets mythology. Godlike beings known as the Golden Tribe called the other Tribes of the universe to come out long ago. There was also the Silver Tribe, the Bronze Tribe, the Iron Tribe and the Heroic Tribe. But after the Golden Tribe took its leave from the universe, problems ensued, like wars and big battling robots. (This is also an anime where robots meet mythology.)

Mecha and future worlds are common themes in anime, but *Heroic Age*'s mythological background, harkening to such Greco-Roman writers as Hesiod and Ovid, give it a little something more. Plus, the main character, Age, likes to steal tentacles and eat them. And he's destined to save the human race! Any series with a batty, immature hero like that is going to be unusual. He does have some manners — after stealing a tentacle from an alien squid monster, he'll shout, "Thank you for being so delicious!" Despite the humor, *Heroic Age* has a serious side too. The animation for the outer space scenes is amazing, and anyone into Greek mythology will enjoy references like The Twelve Labors, the Argonauts, and Hercules' wife, Deianeira. **Danica Davidson**

parting shot

Greco-roboto-mythologico anime sci-fi—there's something there for everyone!

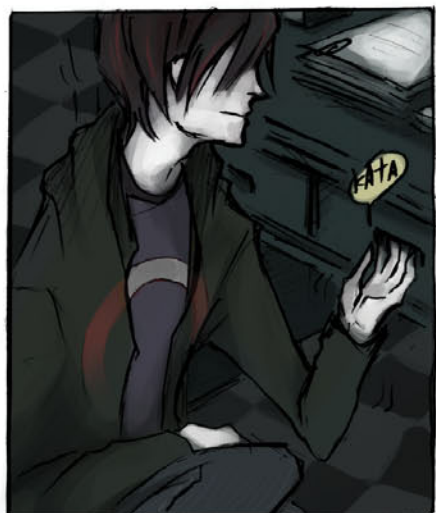
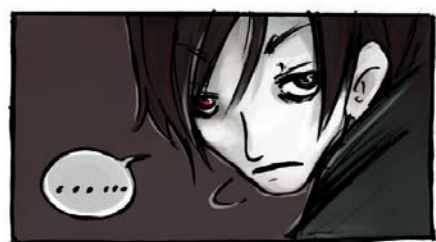


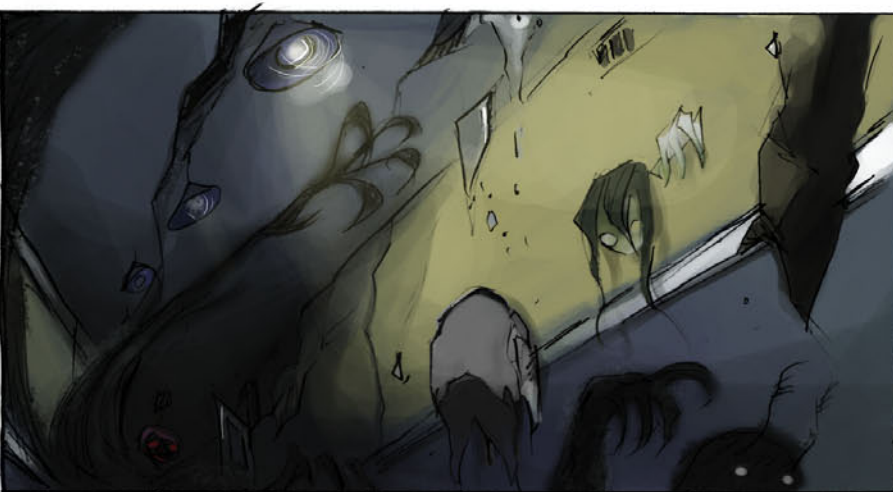
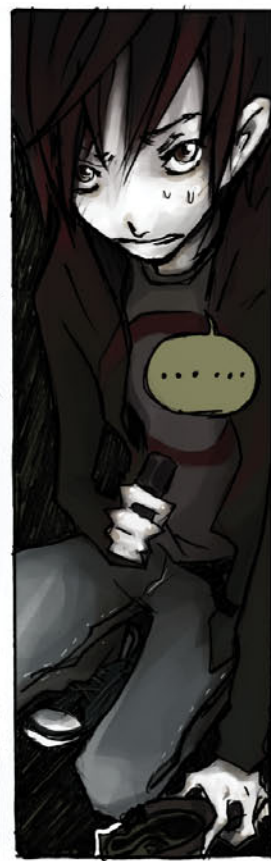
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I have to find Rachael.

To be continued in **LT...**

Chocolate

Studio: Magnet Releasing

Chocolate is a thoroughly satisfying mix of bone-crushing martial arts and self-referential cinema from Thai director Prachya Pinkaew, who helped introduce the world to Tony Jaa in *Ong-Bak: The Thai Warrior* and *The Protector*. Pinkaew does well with fighters in sheep's clothing like the unassuming Jaa; here, his unlikely wrecking crew is Zen (Yanin "Jeeja" Vismistananda), a slip of a teenage girl whose emotions are frozen by autism, but whose mind and body are able to memorize the skills of various kung fu movie stars (including Jaa) through repeat TV viewings, and then unleash them on a string of nefarious types. While Vismistananda lacks Jaa's brute force and superhuman agility, she's no slouch in the whoop-ass department, especially in the film's finale, which sees her scrapping furiously on every floor and balcony of a slum apartment. The DVD includes a making-of that showcases some wince-worthy outtakes and indignities visited upon the stunt team. **Paul Gaita**



Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic

Studio: Warner Home Video

While the rest of the world feverishly deconstructs Zack Snyder's adaptation of *Watchmen*, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' classic graphic novel series, check out a panel by panel recreation of the original story (complete with giant squid) on home video with *Watchmen: The Complete Motion Comic*. Collecting all twelve installments on two discs at a running time of more than five hours, it's a gargantuan undertaking to sit through—except for die-hard fans of the series. But Warner Bros. painstakingly preserves the original Gibbons artwork in beautiful form, truly demonstrating the way in which comic art is as fluid and expressive as any moving image. At the same time, however, the use of just one or two voiceover artists to provide all of the voices undermines the vivid uniqueness of the characters (especially the women), ultimately making this a supplement rather than a substitute for the material's live-action screen incarnation. **Todd Gilchrist**



Shinobi No Mono 3: Resurrection

Studio: Animeigo

Third in Dai-ichi's eight-film series of period ninja adventures from the early '60s, *Shinobi No Mono 3: Resurrection* picks up where the previous film, *Shinobi No Mono 2: Vengeance* left off, with revenge-fueled Ishikawa Goemon (Raizo Ichikawa) about to be boiled alive for his campaign against the corrupt Shogunate. He's rescued by the mysterious Hattori Hanzo and set loose to carry out his plan against the men responsible for the violent deaths of his wife and son. New director Mori Issei carries over the dark tone and frenzied action of the previous two films (directed by Satsuo Yamamoto), but adds a great deal of political intrigue involving power struggles within the family of ruling warlord Toyotomi Hideyoshi (Junchiro Narita). Those seeking straight-up ninja action may find these passages pace-killers; all others may find the blend of action and drama engrossing. Animeigo's DVD includes a wealth of trailers and its usual detailed liner notes. **Paul Gaita**



My Name Is Bruce

Studio: Image Entertainment

If you're tired of quoting Bruce Campbell's one-liners from *Evil Dead II* and *Army of Darkness*, the beloved b-movie actor provides an all-new collection of catchphrases in *My Name Is Bruce*, a tongue-in-cheek supernatural comedy in which Campbell plays none other than himself. Shot specifically to celebrate the cheap production values and bad cinematography of some of his previous efforts, the film offers a few legitimate thrills but otherwise affords Campbell the chance to send up his own dubious stardom. Additionally, the set features a collection of (probably unnecessarily) in-depth featurettes and documentaries, including an *Apocalypse Now* send up entitled "Heart of Dorkness." For Campbell fans, this is essential viewing, but if you aren't already indoctrinated into the Cult of Ash, you may find yourself asking: my name is *who*? **Todd Gilchrist**



Stone

Studio: Severin Films

Though the cover art bills it as a precursor to other post apocalyptic Aussie classics like *The Road Warrior*, Shane Harbutt's *Stone* is in fact a 1974 motorcycle movie-thriller that resembles a scrappy cross between *Easy Rider* and *Point Break*. Though its budget is measly and its conventions familiar, Harbutt's film is a remarkably engaging, straightforward and even sometimes beautiful picture, perfectly capturing the sun-kissed hippie anarchy of the '70s even as it follows an undercover cop's quest to find a killer. Because the film wears its counterculture cred on its sleeve, it comes as little surprise that Disc Two is packed with bonus content celebrating the biking lifestyle, but it's the film itself that will make you long for the thrill of the open road. **Todd Gilchrist**

The Man Who Fell To Earth

Studio: Criterion Collection

For folks who want their sci-fi to feature a little more substance than spectacle, Nicolas Roeg's elliptical *The Man Who Fell To Earth* features some 20 minutes of restored footage, a wealth of in-depth extras and a terrific high-definition transfer. Starring David Bowie, Buck Henry and Rip Torn, the film is both an extraterrestrial opus and a social, political and artistic parable, the intricacies of which are thoroughly explored via a commentary by Roeg, an essay by Graham Fuller, and interviews with key cast and crew members. Of course that still doesn't mean it's necessarily going to make sense, but as an elliptical, transcendent piece of science fiction, a seminal work of '70s cinema, or just a chronicle of Bowie and co. in their heyday, *The Man Who Fell To Earth* is a terrific trip. **Todd Gilchrist**

The Shop



Keep it clean and neat!

The by-product of all those gaming systems stacked on your entertainment system is the tangled, ungainly mess of wires that inevitably occurs. One solution is this slick Wire Wraps protection from GameOn. They flex, so you can stuff them with a variety of cables, and they come with adhesive tape if you want to



make a solid stack or stick to a wall. And if you want to keep all that dust and smudge at bay that adds to the mess, check out GameOn's safe and effective Dirt Rags. They're even anti-bacterial to keep controllers sanitized. www.IWantMyGameOn.com



Logitech G19 Keyboard for Gaming

PC & Mac \$199.99

Fashion meets functionality in this game-changing, possibly even life-changing, keyboard from Logitech. The G19 Keyboard for Gaming is an all-in-one powerhouse for serious gamers who demand the most from their weapon of choice.

Unveiled earlier this year at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas, CA, the G19 is Logitech's first keyboard to feature a color GamePanel LCD which boasts a 320-by-240 pixel display and is capable of displaying vital in-game information such as stats, maps and more. And when you're not in the heat of battle the tiltable screen can also be used to show VoIP communication data, detailed system information, pictures and even supports video playback.

Another notable and highly imperative feature is the twelve fully programmable G-keys, each with three macros per key. The G-keys allow the user to program up to 36 single key presses or macros. Users can also record on-the-fly allowing for maximum customization when time is of the essence. If that wasn't enough, the G19 also supports the input of up to five keys at once for those more complex and intuitive actions.

For those whose gaming rigs reside in the dark cluttered dungeons they call their living quarters, the G19 will not only help organize your life through cable channels located on the belly of the keyboard, but can also illuminate it through fully customizable, user-selectable backlit characters. It can also make your life just a little more accessible too, through two powered hi-speed USB 2.0 ports conveniently located at the top of the keyboard. Sure, the G19 can't guarantee you an in-game victory, but it sure as hell will make the journey whole lot easier; all of this and more for a couple of Benjamins.

Nvidia GeForce 3D Vision

A bold first step towards universal 3D gaming

In its ongoing mission to make your existing video card do more than you bargained for, Nvidia follows up PhysX with GeForce 3D Vision, a GPU-powered stereoscopic 3D gaming solution compatible with dozens of popular PC games. It's all contained in a cool kit that includes the comfortable, lightweight wireless 3D glasses, a 3D Vision transceiver, the set-up software, and every possible accessory—from USB connection to dual-DVI and DVI-to-HDMI cables. If you have a GeForce 8800 GT or better Nvidia card, you're halfway there.

The other half of the 3D Vision equation is a 120 Hz display. ViewSonic, Mitsubishi and Samsung have several compatible 120Hz models in LCD and DLP variations, and any 100Hz or higher old school CRT screen should do the trick (see nvidia.com/3dvision for a full list). The 3D Vision technology exploits the extra available frames of high-Hz displays to execute its lovely depth-enhancing tricks. Our tests were performed on a "realistic" display choice: ViewSonic's sub-\$400 FuHzion VX2265wm, a gamer-focused 120Hz 22-inch LCD with a blistering 3ms response rate.

Though our experience varied from game to game and at different depth settings, when GeForce 3D Vision is at its best (in games like WoW, Left 4 Dead and Mirror's Edge) the stereoscopic 3D effects are very effective: clever alternate depth rendering pulls objects and enemies slightly out of your screen's flat confines, adding exciting definition to distance, evoking surprising sensations. We did notice some minor anomalies across a handful of recent PC titles, but Nvidia continues to roll out compatibility improvements via frequent 3D Vision driver updates. There's also the promise of glorious 3D films and digital photos when you're not dodging frag grenades.



Revoltech Detroit Metal City Figures

Are you shy, gentle and mild mannered? Do you dream of some day becoming a Swedish pop singer? Before you answer "yes" to either question, I want you bind and gag those optimistic aspirations, toss them in the trunk of your car and bury them deep in the woods, never to be unearthed again. My friends, it is time rock!

Proudly display your newly birthed devotion to black metal with these awesome, fully-posable Detroit Metal City action figures based off of the hysterical and very mature anime OVA of the same name.

The bas-ass boys from Tokyo are ready to shred right out of the box. Each one of Kaiyodo's DMC figurines stands 5-6" tall, features 42 points of articulation with 14 joint parts and comes packed with a slew of interchangeable accessories. Buy or steal them from BigBadToyStore.com. \$22.99 ea. "D-M-C. F**K!"



BACK OF THE BOOK

04_09 CASEY LOE
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Blah, blah, blah



A Pact for 2009: Let's Stop Patronizing Gaming's Dirtiest Whores

"Skipping this year's inevitable Castlevania: Quatrain of Despondency and Tales of Whateverica is going to hurt, but it's a sacrifice I need to make. It's a sacrifice we all need to make."

In 2008 we had a chance to declare that we didn't need a Call of Duty every year, but we bought World at War anyway. We had a chance to force Activision to sell us Guitar Hero by the song, but we bought another box of cheap plastic crap instead. We had a chance to refuse to buy a game we already owned, but we couldn't say no to Animal Crossing: City Folk. I'd like to criticize the companies who churn out yearly franchise releases, but how can I when they're so successful? Now every publisher has no choice but to do it, and the ones who led the way have every incentive to step it up even further. Why stop at one Call of Duty every year when you can have Call of Duty: Summer Warfare and Call of Duty: Winter Warfare in the same year? Why upgrade the Guitar Hero guitar only once a year when Guitar Hero: Jonas Brothers surely requires some sort of special new button to fully capture that Jonas Brothers experience? As much as we claim to enjoy original ideas and bold new IP, they're being crowded out by franchise releases we just can't not buy. And even the companies who are resisting the temptation to crank out yearly sequels are finding subtler ways to release the same games over and over again, so their customers can share in the warm, safe feeling of buying a game that will be exactly what they expect it to be. I'm as guilty of this as anyone. I wet myself over the same damn Castlevania and Tales game ever six months. Skipping this year's inevitable Castlevania: Quatrain of Despondency and Tales of Whateverica is going to hurt, but it's a sacrifice I need to make. It's a sacrifice we all need to make. Now, I'm not asking you to avoid new installments in legitimate, non-whored-out franchises like Grand Theft Auto, Mass Effect and The Legend of Zelda. But some franchise-holders go too far. And others go way too far. If you truly want to encourage a video-game marketplace that's open to innovation, join me in spurning the following innovation-raping strategies for the entirety of 2009:

The Yearly Sequel

If you know a game is coming out before it's even announced, and can successfully

peg the release date to within a few weeks, it's banned. Let '09 be the year that the makers of Guitar Hero, Rock Band, Madden, Call of Duty, Spider-Man, and WWE: Smackdown vs. Raw tremble!

The Off-Developer Sequel

If a publisher requires outside developers to churn out sequels while the franchise's main developer are busy working on sequels for the same series, the entire franchise is banned. No more Sonic. No more Tales. No more Pokémon. Call of Duty is doubly banned, so that's a two-year suspension. And Koei's Musou (Dynasty Warriors) series is banned forever.

The Half-Assed Semi-Sequel

If a publisher is trying to cash in on a popular franchise without the effort of actually making a full sequel, the release is banned. No more paying for Mario Party and Animal Crossing games with 30% new content. And no more buying Monster Hunter re-releases that don't even merit a subtitle beyond a single letter appended to their original title.

The Sequel Sold in Pieces

Why should Sony wait until Gran Turismo 5 is actually finished before they sell it? People paid actual money for Gran Turismo 5 Prologue, and then the Japanese went a step further by buying Gran Turismo 5 Prologue Spec III. You can buy Gran Turismo 5 if that actually comes out, but if the next release is Gran Turismo 5 Intermezzo or Gran Turismo Prologue Spec III; Second Refrain, it's banned. And Square Enix is getting a warning for the crap they're pulling with the Japanese Final Fantasy VII Advent Children bundle that comes with a lengthy demo disc for Final Fantasy XIII. That's basically just a \$50 Final Fantasy XIII Prologue, because no sane person wants to own a Blu-Ray of Advent Children.

Whatever the Hell is Going on with Harvest Moon and Megami Tensei

It's time to crack down on the nonsensical spin-off soup that is the Harvest Moon series. It's like four different franchises now and they each have a new installment

every six months. I can't even tell what counts as part of the series anymore, so let's just say that all games involving farming are banned. Also, the Megami Tensei/Persona series is banned for the same reason. I'm sorry Eric, but they've got Persona 4, the Persona 1 remake, that Raidou thing, and that Devil Survivor DS game all in the span of six months. There's probably half a dozen others I don't even know about, so let's just ban every game with that Jack Frost snowman character.

I know that many of these games, despite being brazen money grabs, are actually pretty good. But I'm asking you to take a peek into a future where companies can whore their franchises out without consequence, leaving their loyal fans with no money to buy original IPs. We'll have active spin-offs to every numbered Final Fantasy each and every year, including Final Fantasy X2II. We'll have Epic-developed Gears of War sequels in even years and Gearbox-developed Gear of Hurt games in odd years. We'll be paying \$50 a year for nothing more than slightly modified furniture catalogs in Animal Crossing: Rural Folk, Animal Crossing: Suburban Folk, and Animal Crossing: Downtown Folk. We'll have Halo 4: First Skirmish and Halo 4: Second Volley before we get the actual Halo 4... Which will end in a cliffhanger that isn't resolved until Halo 4 Epilogue: Final Reckoning.

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